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THOMAS MANN'S INTERPRETATION OF ANTON CHEKHOV
IN HIS ESSAY "VERSUCH ÜBER TSCHÉCHOW"

by



Ulrike Conradi

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Thomas Mann's Interpretation of Anton Chekhov in his Essay 'Versuch über Tschechow,'" submitted by Ulrike Conradi in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

Thomas Mann's absorbing interest late in his life in the Russian short story writer and dramatist Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was inspired by Mann's recognition that Chekhov like himself was troubled by serious doubts concerning the meaning and value of his literary work for mankind. These doubts, according to Mann, extend beyond the artist's own literary activity to a scepticism of the meaning and value of art itself.

After a brief review of Mann's acquaintance with Chekhov prior to 1954, when the essay "Versuch über Tschechow" was written, this thesis has attempted in a close analysis of the ideas expressed by Mann in his essay firstly with respect to Chekhov's artistic development and secondly regarding Chekhov's creative activity in the period of his artistic maturity, to elucidate to what extent Th. Mann's own ideas about the nature of art and the role of the artist govern his interpretation of Chekhov.

The analysis and comparison of Mann's and Chekhov's respective attitudes in relation to problems arising out of the central theme of the essay--the connection between the aesthetical and the ethical in art--reveal that Mann's concept of art, based upon the traditions of realism and naturalism, and standing under the influence of German idealistic philosophy, led him to misinterpret one fundamental aspect of Chekhov's art. Mann places the emphasis in his interpretation on Chekhov's struggle to find an ethical guideline which would help to overcome the discrepancy existing between truth and reality, "Geist" and "Leben." For him Chekhov's "A Boring Story," in which the idea is expressed that life becomes meaningless without such a guideline, represents the clearest what he considered to be the basic problem in Chekhov's life and art.

However, not only did Chekhov, as a positivist and materialist, negate any underlying ethical purpose in life, but a study of the ideas expressed in his letters and an analysis of the stories has shown that Chekhov's principles on art required the complete elimination of any interference of the author's own standpoint--the foundation of Mann's ethical concept. Chekhov's manner of depicting life in art, his view of reality, therefore, is best seen not in "A Boring Story," but in such stories as "The Man Who Lived in a Shell" and "Chameleon." His artistic principles, which did not change throughout his life, distinguish Chekhov as one of the major representatives of impressionism.

Yet Mann's essay has also made it apparent that in the final analysis, despite the differences between the interpreter and the painter of life, there is a common bond between them--their profound love and concern for mankind.

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I INTRODUCTION: A GENERAL SURVEY OF THOMAS MANN'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH CHEKHOV

The works of the Russian writer Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904), which have become widely known and acclaimed during the last decades both in the Soviet Union and the Western world, have received numerous and varied interpretations. An interpretation of Chekhov's life and works by the renowned German novelist and essayist Thomas Mann is of particular interest since in this case one major writer is commenting on another.

Thomas Mann's relation to Russia and its literature--the importance and the nature of the influence of specific authors and their works on Mann's Weltanschauung and artistic development--has already been dealt with in several works, although it was not until 1967 that a detailed analysis of this problem was carried out by Alois Hofman in his book Thomas Mann und die Welt der russischen Literatur.¹

Not only in such previous studies as the book by Lilli Venohr, Thomas Manns Verhältnis zur russischen Literatur,² but also in the work by Hofman Mann's attitude towards Chekhov is given only minor consideration. This is unwarranted, since it is exactly in Chekhov that Thomas Mann found a confirmation, a reflection of the convictions he held in relation to life and art in the period of his greatest maturity. His essay "Versuch über Tschechow,"³

¹Alois Hofman, Thomas Mann und die Welt der russischen Literatur (Berlin, 1967).

²Lilli Venohr, Thomas Manns Verhältnis zur russischen Literatur, Frankfurter Abhandlungen zur Slawistik, I, 1959.

³Thomas Mann, "Versuch über Tschechow," Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden: Reden und Aufsätze (Oldenburg: S. Fischer Verlag, 1960), IX, 843-869. This essay was originally published in Sinn und Form, V/VI (1954). All quotations from the essay will be taken from the first-mentioned source and will be indicated in my text by the page number directly after the quotation.

written in 1954, is evidence of a deep feeling of congeniality, of Mann's absorbing interest in Chekhov. He felt that they were "Brüder im Leide" (p.859). Since the essay by H. Mahlberg, "Thomas Mann als Betrachter der russischen Literatur" (1946)⁴ and André von Gronicka's essay, "Thomas Mann and Russia" (1945),⁵ were both published before Th. Mann had written his "Versuch," they cannot do full justice to the problem of Mann's relation to Chekhov.

Thomas Mann became acquainted with some of Chekhov's works fairly early in his life. In a letter to Korfiz Holm, June 7, 1898, he writes: "Den 'Zweikampf' ['Duel'] habe ich mit ungeheurem Interesse gelesen. Diese Russen können erzählen . . . !" ⁶ Yet at this time he makes no further mention of other works of Chekhov he may have read. Other Russian authors begin to play from now on a major role in the formation of Th. Mann's thoughts and in his own artistic endeavors. André von Gronicka states:

It was in the summer of 1898 during his visit with his brother Heinrich in Rome that in the solitude of his study he turned with fervor to Turgenev, Goncharov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and Merezhkovsky. He sought and found in the works of these Russian authors assistance and inspiration in his quest for a personal style, in his arduous labors on his first novel of truly epic proportions, Buddenbrooks.⁷

In his essay "Russische Anthologie" (1921), which served as an introduction to Alexander Eliasberg's German anthology of Russian stories, Th. Mann

⁴Heinrich Mahlberg, "Thomas Mann als Betrachter der russischen Literatur," Der kleine Bund (Bern, 1946), 27, pp. 153-156.

⁵André von Gronicka, "Thomas Mann and Russia," The Stature of Thomas Mann, ed. Charles Neider (New York, 1945), pp. 307-325.

⁶Thomas Mann, Briefe 1889-1936 (n.p.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1961), p. 9. Most likely Th. Mann is referring in this quotation to the translation of Chekhov's story by Korfiz Holm, 1897.

⁷Gronicka, p. 307.

emphasizes that he considered his relation to Russian literature during this time "als eine lebenswichtige Angelegenheit."⁸ He continues:

In der Tat sind es zwei Erlebnisse, welche den Sohn des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, der bürgerlichen Epoche zur neuen Zeit in Beziehung setzen, ihn vor Erstarrung und geistigem Sterben schützen und ihm Brücken in die Zukunft bauen--nämlich das Erlebnis Nietzsches und das des russischen Wesens.⁹

As Lilli Venohr writes: "Es ist wohl weniger das allgemeine Interesse seiner Zeit an der russischen Literatur als seine persönliche Zwiespältigkeit und Unsicherheit"¹⁰ which caused him to seek in Russian literature spiritual support and council.

Yet the uncertainty within Th. Mann was the direct outcome of the problems governing society. They revolved around the question stated by Mann in his essay, "Goethe und Tolstoi" (1925):

. . . ob die mediterran-klassisch-humanistische Überlieferung eine Menschheitssache und darum menschlich-ewig oder ob sie nur Geistesform und Zubehör einer Epoche, nämlich der bürgerlich-liberalen, war und mit ihr sterben kann.¹¹

The spirit of the time was marked by a sceptical, pessimistic turning away from humanistic traditions and values and an escapism into either a dull, insensitive materialism or a pure aestheticism. It was in his search for that which is "menschlich-ewig," for ways of overcoming the widening disparity between "Geist" and "Leben," that Th. Mann turned to what he called in his youth "die heilige russische Literatur."¹² Alois Hofman writes:

⁸Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden: Altes und Neues (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1956), XI, p. 577.

⁹Ibid., pp. 577-578.

¹⁰Venohr, p. 12.

¹¹Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," Gesammelte Werke, F.V. [used in this thesis as the abbreviation of S. Fischer Verlag], IX, p. 166.

¹²Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," Werke, A.V. [used in this thesis as the abbreviation of Aufbau-Verlag], XI, p. 575.

Das russische Schrifttum half mit bei der Überwindung der Kulturkrise am Ausgang des Jahrhunderts, bei der Besiegung des Unglaubens an ein besseres Menschengeschlecht, der Gewissensnöte und Zweifel des bürgerlichen Künstlers an seiner Berufung in dieser Epoche, die einerseits das Kennzeichen eines "geistigen Germanien" (Stefan George) oder eines bohèmehaften Anarchismus trug, andererseits vom größten Materialismus bestimmt war. . . .

Das echte Vermächtnis der russischen Klassiker, ihr Beispiel riesenhaften Ringens um die Rettung des Menschen, übernimmt erst Thomas Mann. In seinem Werk läutern und klären sich in organischer Verwandlung die Wirrnisse und Gegensätze der Zeit am reinsten. Mit ihrer Versöhnung gipfelt auch sein Werk.¹³

Thomas Mann regarded the Russian literature of the nineteenth century, beginning with Gogol, as modern, because, as he writes in the "Russische Anthologie": "Mit Gogol setzt aber sofort das ein, was Mereschkowski die 'Kritik' oder den 'Übergang vom unbewussten Schaffen zum schöpferischen Bewusstsein' nennt. . . ." Pushkin he considered as "historisch und vor-modern . . . den Goethe des Ostens." With Gogol a new element entered literature, "statt der Poesie der Kritizismus, statt der Naivität die religiöse Problematik und statt der Heiterkeit die Komik."¹⁴ Russian literature appealed so strongly to Th. Mann, because it was "komisch aus Realismus, aus Leid und Mitleid, aus tiefster Menschlichkeit, aus satirischer Verzweiflung, auch aus einfacher Lebensfrische. . . ."¹⁵ He placed Russian humour above English, German, and French humour, because it had "menschlich gewinnende Kräfte" which are "religiöser Herkunft."¹⁶

This religious element, however, Mann discovered to be of a new and different kind. Its source is criticism. This idea, "Kritik als Anfang der Religion"¹⁷ had been found by Mann in Dmitri Merezhkovsky's interpretation

¹³Hofman, pp. 76-77.

¹⁴Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," A.V., XI, p. 574.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 575.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 578.

of the development of Russian literature. This interpretation had a considerable influence on Mann's own view of Russian writers, especially during the time when he first became acquainted with them, when he still regarded Merezhkovsky as "der genialste Kritiker und Weltpsychologe seit Nietzsche!"¹⁸ Merezhkovsky's concept of Russian literature as the arena in which the struggle for a synthesis "von Aufklärung und Glauben, von Freiheit und Gebundenheit, von Geist und Fleisch, 'Gott' und 'Welt'" is carried out, was accepted by Mann as his own. "Und uns scheint, dass, seit Gogols Tagen, der Kampf um das 'Reich,' um das neue Menschentum und die neue Religion, um die Verleiblichung des Geistes und die Vergeistigung des Fleisches, nirgends kühner und inniger geführt wird als in der russischen Seele."¹⁹

This struggle for a synthesis between "Geist und Fleisch" in Russian literature was the leitmotiv of Th. Mann's own life and work. It clarifies the nature of his relations not only to Russian literature but to any manifestation of the human spirit and intellect. In a speech to the Warsaw PEN-Club in 1924, he himself said:

. . . persönlich genommen gibt es Erlebnisse unterirdischer Beziehungen, des Wiedererkennens und der Verwandtschaftsfeststellung von Nation zu Nation, wie sie früher in dieser Unmittelbarkeit und Intimität kaum möglich waren. . . . So wird das Nationale zu einer mehr oder weniger formalen Angelegenheit, einer mehr oder weniger äusserlichen Schicksalsabwandlung, und hervor tritt das Wesentliche, Persönliche, das menschlich Verwandte.²⁰

This deep inner affinity which bridges national boundaries and specific national and individual traits existed for Mann because he regarded Russian literature from the point of view of his own conflicts. Only those authors

¹⁸Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," A.V., XI, p. 576.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 578.

²⁰Thomas Mann, "Im Warschauer PEN-Club," Werke, A.V., XI, p. 356.

whose works seemed to deal with the same problem, successfully or unsuccessfully, had a decisive influence on his life and work. In this connection Alois Hofman writes:

Thomas Mann verleugnet seine Lehrer keineswegs und bestätigt mit Dank die feinen Bande, die ihn mit ihnen verknüpfen. Das Entscheidende aber ist, dass er sich diese Lehrer selbst gewählt und von ihnen nur das angenommen hat, das seiner Natur angemessen war.²¹

This does not mean, however, that Mann appropriated ideas, images, motives, uncritically, nor that material from other writers entered directly into his own literary productions. The role his own imagination played in the amalgamation of foreign material he explained in a letter to Kurt Martens:

Jeder Lyriker, der nichts kann, als direkt seine eigene Seele aussprechen, beweist, dass ich Recht habe. . . . Ich sage, dass, wer nichts hätte als "Erfindung," von der Colportage nicht weit entfernt wäre. Ich sage, dass sehr grosse Dichter ihrer Lebtag nichts erfunden, sondern nur Überliefertes mit ihrer Seele erfüllt und neu gestaltet haben. (March 28, 1906)²²

Thus Mann's interest in Russian literature, in literature of other foreign countries, as well as in his own national literature was essentially of a personal nature. The stimulation he received from other literary works was transformed and received the stamp of Mann's own personality and creativity.

Thomas Mann's knowledge of Russian literature, as Lilli Venohr indicates, was already fairly extensive by 1920. She writes: "Die 'Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen,' 1918, zeigen, dass Mann über eine verhältnismässig gute Kenntnis der russischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts verfügt."²³ She mentions, moreover, that Mann's acquaintance with the works of Gogol, Goncharov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy was aided by the fact that German trans-

²¹Hofman, p. 16.

²²Thomas Mann, Briefe 1889-1936, p. 62.

²³Venohr, p. 12.

lations of their complete works appeared after the turn of the century.²⁴ Mann himself, furthermore, emphasizes in his essay "Russische Anthologie" the importance and the influence on himself of Merezhkovsky's essays "Tolstoj und Dostojewskij: Leben-Schaffen-Religion" and "Gogol" (translated into German, as Lilli Venohr states, in 1905 and 1914 respectively).²⁵ He exclaims in admiration of Merezhkovsky:

Er, dessen Buch über Tolstoi und Dostojewski auf meine zwanzig Jahre einen so unauslöschlichen Eindruck machte und dessen ebenfalls völlig beispielloses Werk über Gogol ich überhaupt nicht wegstelle!²⁶

In the essay "Versuch über Tschechow" Th. Mann wrote that he only gradually over the years obtained a more thorough knowledge of Chekhov's life and works. Partly to blame for this might be the lack of satisfactory, comprehensive translations, a sign that the world generally had at that time not yet recognized the true value of Chekhov's achievements. In his essay on Chekhov Mann states, furthermore, that although he was far more acquainted with Maupassant, also a master of the short form, his admiration for the great epic works proved a hindrance to a deeper appreciation of Chekhov's writings. The main reason, however, seems to be the nature of Mann's own interests and needs in his youth, the fact that what he had read up till that time of Chekhov's stories did not strike an inner chord of empathy relating Chekhov to the problems Mann was concerned with. Thus Th. Mann suggested to A. Eliasberg that Chekhov's story "Jungens" ["Mal'čiki"], 1887, be included in his anthology of Russian stories instead of some other

²⁴Venohr, p. 12.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," A.V., XI, p. 576.

Neither the Deutsche Bibliographie (Frankfurt a.M.), nor the Vollständiges Bücher Lexikon by C. G. Kayser (Leipzig), nor the British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books mention a German or English translation of Merezhkovsky's essay on Chekhov and Gorky ["Čechov i Gor'ki," in: Grjaduščij Cham, 1906]. It is possible, therefore, that Mann was not acquainted with it.

perhaps more important work. "Ich bin dafür eingestanden," he writes, "um ihrer tief erheiternden Lebendigkeit willen, und weil sie in ihrer Anspruchslosigkeit ein glücklichstes Beispiel russischer Komik aus blosser Lebensfrische ist."²⁷

Evidence of this love for the comic aspect in Chekhov's stories reappears in Mann's essay on Chekhov. Yet it was not until he undertook to study Chekhov's life and works seriously in 1954, that he recognized this inner affinity with Chekhov, which had formerly drawn him to the other great Russian writers. During this early period, as far as I was able to ascertain, Chekhov's name rarely appears. For example, in his introduction to A. Eliasberg's Bildergalerie zur russischen Literatur (1922), in which the portraits of 88 well-known Russian writers from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the 1920's are presented, Mann does not mention Chekhov at all, although he names such authors as Bunin, Remizov, Biely, A. Tolstoy in addition to Gogol, Dostoevsky, and L. N. Tolstoy. One other work, a play, which he mentions specifically as having seen performed at this same time, is "Uncle Vanja" ["Djadja Vanja"], 1897. He writes in his essay on Chekhov: "Es ist viele Jahrzehnte her, dass ich in München einmal eines seiner Stücke . . . 'Onkel Wanja,' auf der Bühne sah" (p.866). Whether he, in this early period, was acquainted with any of the other stories and plays cited in his "Versuch über Tschechow" remains uncertain. A list of Chekhov's stories and plays mentioned in the essay, letters from which Mann quoted (as far as I was able to find their source) and other works used by Th. Mann for this essay, will be placed at the end of the introduction.

²⁷Thomas Mann, "Russische Anthologie," A.V., XI, p. 582.

Furthermore, Chekhov is mentioned occasionally in connection with L. N. Tolstoy, from the point of view of Tolstoy's relations to Chekhov, as in the essay "Goethe und Tolstoi." André von Gronicka states that in writing this essay Thomas Mann derived "by far the most significant aid and inspiration . . . from Dmitri Merezhkovsky's Tolstoy-Dostoyevsky biography, and, especially, from Maxim Gorky's Recollections of Tolstoy."²⁸ In his essay on Chekhov, Mann quotes directly, from a German translation of this latter work, a phrase in which Tolstoy, expressing his opinion of Chekhov, says that he considers him "einen prächtigen, stillen, bescheidenen Menschen" (p.844).²⁹ Mann was also acquainted with Gorky's reminiscences of Chekhov, quoting from them Gorky's statement: "er habe 'keinen Menschen gekannt, der so tief die Bedeutung der Arbeit empfunden habe wie Tschechow'" (p.858).³⁰ Mann had read, furthermore, Gorky's "A. P. Chekhov's Story 'In the Ravine'" (1900), in a German translation, since he quotes from it the section: "Als Stilist ist Tschechow unerreicht, und der künftige Literaturhistoriker wird, wenn er über das Wachstum der russischen Sprache nachdenkt, sagen, dies Sprache ist von Puschkin, Turgenjew und Tschechow geschaffen worden" (p.851).³¹

²⁸Gronicka, p. 313.

²⁹Since a German translation of Gorky's reminiscences of Tolstoy, as well as of Chekhov (they will be mentioned later in this paper) was not available, I used the following English source: Maxim Gorky, Literature and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Maxim Gorki, trans. Edith Bone (London, 1946) The full quotation of Tolstoy's comment on Chekhov is: "What a charming and excellent man; modest, quiet, like a young lady! He even walks like a girl. Simply marvellous" (Literature and Life, p. 65).

³⁰Maxim Gorki, "A. P. Chekhov (1905 and 1914)," Literature and Life, p.85.

³¹Maxim Gorki, "A. P. Chekhov's Story 'In the Ravine,'" Literature and Life, p. 88.

The first indications that Mann was working more assiduously on Chekhov appeared in a letter to Walter Janka, July 7, 1954, and in a letter to Friedrich H. Weber, July 18, 1954. In the letter to F. H. Weber Mann quotes a statement concerning his own work which Walter Muschg made in his book Tragische Literaturgeschichte. Mann writes: "Mit seinem Spruch 'Er ergötzt eine verlorene Welt ohne ihr die Spur einer rettenden Wahrheit in die Hand zu geben' hat der Dichter Muschg ja nicht so unrecht."³² Thomas Mann feels that in this respect Muschg's opinion of him is correct "weil ich ja selbst im Zweifel an mir ziemlich stark bin und das berühmte 'Thou com'st in such a questionable shape' mir in der Anwendung auf mich selbst keineswegs fremd ist."³³ But Mann adds that this does not only seem to be his own particular fate:

Schon mancher gewissenhafte Schriftsteller [Mann states] hat sich gefragt: "Betrüge ich nicht die Leser mit meinem Talent, da ich die letzten Fragen doch nicht zu beantworten weiss?" Ich citiere da Anton Tschechow, über den ich eben arbeite, weil er mir unendlich sympathisch ist und zwar gerade durch die "Angst," die sein Ruhm ihm einflösste.³⁴

In this letter Mann states the central idea of his "Versuch über Tschechow." Later in the letter he even quotes sections from Chekhov's "A Dreary Story" ["Skučnaja Istorija"], 1889, which play a decisive role in his essay to the above problem.

³²Thomas Mann, Briefe 1948-1955 (Kempten/Allgäu: S. Fischer Verlag, 1965), p. 349. This sentence by Walter Muschg plays a major role in Th. Mann's "Versuch über Tschechow."

³³Ibid. The phrase "Thou comest in such a questionable shape" as an expression of Mann's doubts towards himself is also repeated in the essay "Für Alfred Neumann" (1952) where Mann adds: "ich habe es nie den anderen überlassen, so von mir zu denken; ich zuerst dachte so" (Werke, A.V., XI, p. 302).

³⁴Thomas Mann, Briefe 1948-1955, pp. 349-350. See pp. 59-60.

In the letters written at this time the mood, the themes and ideas to be found in Mann's essay on Chekhov are already anticipated. In a letter to Erika Mann, June 7, 1954, he writes that "zu der Bangigkeit, den Zweifeln, der Melancholie, die über meinem späten Leben liegen . . ." is added the oppressing feeling:

. . . das Talent oder doch die Energie, es spielen zu lassen, sei mir ausgegangen--ein scheussliches Gefühl, denn ohne Arbeit, d.h. ohne tätige Hoffnung, wüsste ich nicht zu leben. Da bleibt denn immer nur die Berufung darauf, dass ich doch noch kürzlich ganz Begabtes und Geglücktes gemacht habe, und dass nur Zerstreutheit und Müdigkeit, die nicht zu dauern brauchen, an meiner gegenwärtigen Ratlosigkeit schuld sind.³⁵

This feeling of spiritual depression dominated Mann at this time to such an extent that he was almost convinced of the necessity of giving up all further creative activity, although he was not capable of doing this.

In a letter to Emil Preetorius, September 6, 1954, he writes:

Aber ich verstehe mich nicht darauf, weiss nicht, wie ohne Arbeit die Tage verbringen und ringe nach Leistung, ohne die Spannkraft zu finden, die sie ermöglicht. Ein quälender Zustand. Für das früher Getane mich feiern zu lassen . . . ist eher beschämend als ermutigend und hat etwas von Betrug.³⁶

This scepticism and doubt, this feeling of deceiving the reader was particularly strong in Mann at a time when old age and ill health robbed him not only of physical strength, but also threatened to deprive him of creative power. This feeling brought the basic conflict of his life to a crisis, to a final test. With it came the admiring recognition that Chekhov, while yet a young man, had plumbed the same spiritual depths that Mann was experiencing then. Mann wrote in the letter to F. H. Weber:

³⁵Thomas Mann, Briefe 1948-1955, pp. 345-346.

³⁶Ibid., p. 356.

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"Mit 29 Jahren konnte er sich in die Gefühle eines dem Tode nahen Greises versetzen (in dem Meisterwerk 'Eine langweilige Geschichte')." ³⁷

Mann's deep interest in Chekhov was a sign not of a change in Mann's personality, but of a recognition or rather an admission of his own true nature. Whereas for the greater part of his life he had yearned to identify, to find a similarity between himself and such "naive" writers as Goethe and Tolstoy, who created their literary works out of an unconscious unity and harmony with nature and life, his turn towards Schiller, a "sentimental" writer, near the end of his life (in his essay "Versuch über Schiller," 1955), testifies that Mann realized that he, like Schiller, did not create in this manner. Since he regarded reality from the critical distance of "Geist," his whole life was in truth a struggle to bring his art into a closer relation to life. In Russian literature he had hoped to find the means of overcoming his own decadent tendency; in Chekhov he rediscovered his own, almost tragic, dilemma.

The essay "Versuch über Tschechow" is evidence of Mann's growing self-recognition in Chekhov's life and works. In Chekhov he found his idea of a brotherhood in spirit reaffirmed. It was founded on two basic attitudes. Firstly, that there is no final answer to the question as to the meaning of life (expressed for example in a letter to Else Vielhaber, March 30, 1955):

Denn schliesslich steht ja doch die Frage da nach dem letzten Ursprung von Natur und Leben, der ganzen ungeheuerlichen kosmischen Veranstaltung. Kein Mensch wird die Frage je beantworten. Wir leben und sterben alle im Rätsel, und das Gefühl dafür kann man, wenn man will, religiös nennen. Es ist ein etwas anspruchsvolles Wort, aber das Bewusstsein hoffnungsloser Unwissenheit kommt ja einer gewissen Frömmigkeit ohne Weiteres gleich. ³⁸

³⁷Thomas Mann, Briefe 1948-1955, p. 350.

³⁸Ibid., p. 390.

Secondly, that man, in spite of this inability to find an absolute meaning in life, must struggle "zugunsten einer neuen, vertieften und unrhetorischen, durch alle Höllen des Leides und der Erkenntnis hindurchgegangenen Humanität."³⁹

This was for Thomas Mann the moral duty of the artist. In a letter to J. Ma. Corredor, March 1954, Mann expresses his profound veneration for the artist Pablo Casals, his admiration

. . . angesichts eines menschlichen Phänomens, in welchem ein hinreissendes Künstlertum sich mit entschiedenster Verweigerung jedes Zugeständnisses an das Böse, an das moralisch Miserable und die Gerechtigkeit Beleidigende auf eine Weise verbindet, die geradezu unseren Begriff vom Künstler läutert und erhöht, ihn für einmal jeder Ironie entzieht und in verwildeter Zeit ein Beispiel stolzer, durch nichts zu bestechender Integrität setzt. . . . Er ist zum Symbol geworden eines Künstlertums, das unverführbar auf sich hält, zum Symbol unerschütterlicher Einheit von Kunst und Moralität.⁴⁰

Thomas Mann also interprets Chekhov's life and work from the point of view of the unity "von Kunst und Moralität."

It is the aim of this thesis, in a close analysis of Thomas Mann's "Versuch über Tschechow," to determine to what extent and in what manner Mann's own ideas on the nature of art and the role of the artist, at this late stage in Mann's life, have influenced his view of Chekhov. First will be discussed the themes and problems dealt with by Th. Mann with regard to Chekhov's artistic development and second, the conclusions he draws from them concerning Chekhov's attitude towards his art in the period of his artistic maturity, as seen in his interpretation of Chekhov's stories. Furthermore, a clarification of Chekhov's own standpoint, mainly in relation to the problems treated by Mann, will be given throughout. This will help to elucidate the differences and similarities between their respective attitudes towards art.

³⁹Thomas Mann, "Dostoevski--mit Maszen [sic]," S.V., IX, p. 673.

⁴⁰Thomas Mann, Briefe 1948-1955, pp. 329-330.

Stories and Plays by Chekhov

mentioned in Thomas Mann's "Versuch über Tschechow":

"Der Tod des Beamten" ["Smert' Činovnika"], 1883.

"Der Dicke und der Dünne" ["Tolstyj i Tonkij"], 1883.

"Ein Delinquent" ["Zloumyšlennik"], 1885.

"Sergeant Prishibeyev" ["Unter Prišibeev"], 1885; no title is mentioned.

"Typhus" ["Tif"], 1887; no title is mentioned.

"Eine langweilige Geschichte" ["Skučnaja Istorija"], 1889.

"Krankenstation Nr. 6" ["Palata No. 6"], 1892.

"Der Taugenichts" ["Moja Žizn'"], 1896.

"Die Bauern" ["Mužiki"], 1897.

"Ein Fall aus der Praxis" ["Slučaj iz praktiki"], 1898.

"Die Braut" ["Nevesta"], 1903.

Die Möwe [Čajka], 1896.

Onkel Wanja [Djadja Vanja], 1897.

Der Kirschgarten [Višnjevyyj sad], 1904.

Letters by Chekhov referred to by Mann in his essay on Chekhov: (The place of reference in the essay will be indicated by the page number.)

Letters to:

A. S. Souvorin, December 17, 1890. (p.845)

A. S. Souvorin, September 8, 1891. (p.845)

A. S. Souvorin, March 27, 1894. (p.845)

A. S. Souvorin, May 7, 1889. (p.845-846)

A. S. Souvorin, December 17, 1890, or A. S. Souvorin, October 19, 1891.
(p. 846; see p. 55, n. 97)

A. S. Souvorin, September 11, 1888. (p.846; see p. 53, n. 95)

A. S. Souvorin, October 27, 1888. (p.846; see pp. 59-60)

N. A. Leikin, August, 1883. (p.850; see p. 26, n. 50)

Letter by D. W. Grigorovich to Chekhov, March 25, 1886. (p.851-852)

Letters to:

D. W. Grigorovich, March 28, 1886. (p.852)

A. S. Souvorin, November 28, 1888. (p.855; see p. 61, n. 105)

A. S. Souvorin, April 1, 1890. (p.857)

A. S. Souvorin, November 25, 1892. (p.858)

A. S. Souvorin, November 25, 1892. (p.858, uncertain; see p. 66, n. 113)

A. S. Souvorin, May 30, 1888. (p.864; see p. 43, n. 78)

A. S. Souvorin, March 5, 1889. (This letter comments on Dostoevsky.
It is not mentioned in the thesis.)

A. S. Souvorin, February, 14, 1889. (p.868)

I was unable to find the source of the quotations on the following pages in Mann's essay: p.847-848; p.853; p.859; p.865.

Other sources used by Mann for this essay:

Walter Muschg, Tragische Literaturgeschichte, 1953. (See p. 10, n. 32)

The translation of Chekhov's "The Duel" ("Der Zweikampf") by Korfiz Holm, 1897.

A German translation of: M. Gor'kij, "Lev Tolstoj," Sobranie Sočinenij (Moskva, 1951), VIII, pp. 253-300.

A German translation of: M. Gor'kij, "A. P. Čechov," Sobranie Sočinenij (Moskva, 1951), V, pp. 417-435.

A German translation of: Maxim Gorki, "About A. P. Chekhov's Story 'In the Ravine' (1900)," Literature and Life, trans. Edith Bone (London, 1946), pp. 86-90.

Note: The transliteration of Russian words, names, and titles follows the table "used by specialists" in D. S. Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), vii. If, however, the transliteration given in a quotation differs from this

system, this thesis will retain the spelling of the quotation. Moreover, the translations of Chekhov's works used as a source in this thesis follow different transliteration systems. When referring directly to these sources, the transliteration of names given in them will be retained.

II ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

The Early, Unconscious State of Art

Thomas Mann's love for the great epic work, "die Faszination durch das >grosse Werk<, den >langen Atem<, das in mächtiger Geduld durchgehaltene und vollendet epische Monument" (p.843) was largely responsible for his lack of any deeper interest until late in his life for the short story writer, "[den] russischen Novellisten" (p.843) Anton Chekhov. In fact he was always rather scornful of artistic endeavors which did not require "des heroischen Ausharrens durch Jahre oder Jahrzehnte" (p.843).

Thomas Mann admired the epic work, because it demands of the artist patience and self-control, the concentration of his thoughts on the one subject of his immediate work. For Mann this meant renunciation, banishment of ideas diverging from the subject, voluntary restriction of the imagination in broadness of scope in order to allow it expansion in depth. An apparently simple idea, the subject for a short story may contain endless possibilities for its development at first unnoticed by the author. Mann for example, had planned his long novel, The Magic Mountain, originally as a short story. However, "eine heimliche Ahnung von den Gefahren der Ausdehnung dieser Erzählung, von der Neigung des Stoffes zum Bedeutenden und zum gedanklich Uferlosen, beschlich mich schon bald."⁴¹ The potential lying dormant in the many short story themes life presents at first glance gives a work its own intrinsic will and ambition. A simple idea can, like a musical theme, become the basis of a great composition. Th. Mann writes in the introduction to The Magic Mountain:

⁴¹Thomas Mann, Der Zauberberg (Darmstadt: Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, 1967), p. v.

Ein Werk hat unter Umständen seinen eigenen Ehrgeiz, der den des Autors weit übertreffen mag, und das ist gut so. Denn der Ehrgeiz darf nicht ein Ehrgeiz der Person sein, er darf nicht vor dem Werk stehen, sondern dieses muss ihn aus sich hervorbringen und dazu zwingen. So, glaube ich, sind die grossen Werke entstanden und nicht aus einem Ehrgeiz, der sich von vorneherein vorsetzt, ein grosses Werk zu schaffen.⁴²

This, according to Mann, places high demands upon the author. The artist must learn initially to perceive, to penetrate beyond this shallow, simple surface. He must discover life's underlying mysteries, its untold wealth before he can give it form. He must learn not only to free, to expand and develop the potential of his original idea, but also to retain it within certain limits. This process of recreating life in art requires of the artist much work, patience and perseverance. From this point of view it is understandable that Mann at first regarded the short story, the work of only a few days or weeks, as a not-very serious form of art, and a writer of such stories as "ein künstlerischer Leichtfuss (p.843).

Thomas Mann gradually revised this attitude towards the end of his life. Through a closer study of Chekhov's works he began to recognize and admire the artistic powers required in order to squeeze into the narrow frame of the short story the vast panorama of life which Chekhov portrays. Although they lacked epic monumentality he felt that Chekhov's stories attained epic rank. Mann admits in the essay on Chekhov:

Ich hegte eine gewisse Geringschätzung dafür, ohne recht gewahr zu werden, welche inneren Masse, kraft des Genies, das Kurze und Knappe gewinnen, in welcher--vielleicht über alles zu bewundernden--Gedrängtheit es die ganze Fülle des Lebens in sich aufnehmen, sich durchaus zu epischem Rang erheben, ja, an künstlerischer Intensität das Grosse, das Riesenwerk, das unvermeidlich manchmal müde wird und ehrwürdiger Langeweile verfällt, wohl gar übertreffen kann.(p.844).

⁴²Mann, Zauberberg, p. v.

Chekhov's own attitude towards his literary work during the first period of his creativity (until the year 1886-1887) indeed confirmed Mann's former opinion of artistic lightheartedness. It was not until the year 1886 that Chekhov began to make a more serious appraisal of his own talent.

In his early years at school in Taganrog, his birthplace, Chekhov's talent provided an outlet for his exuberant spirit of fun. He showed a marked sense of the comic, an ability to impersonate people and to portray situations in a very humorous manner. Th. Mann notes this early tendency "zur Lustigkeit und Lustigmacherei, zur Clownerie und zum mimischen Spass, der sich von Beobachtung nährt und sie in karikierend vorführende Nachahmung übersetzt" (p.847). Chekhov poked fun playfully at the oddities and idiosyncracies of Taganrog life. In this way he could brighten a dull, dreary, oppressive life which consisted to a large extent, as Mann described it, of long hours working in his father's store, of choir practices and of learning in a school which stifled any creativity or independence of thought.

Although Chekhov began the humorous manuscript magazine The Stammerer [Zaika] in 1875, and a few years later even wrote several humorous tales, his comic vein manifested itself first and strongest in this art of mimicry. Small theatrical productions were staged in the Chekhov home. For some of these Chekhov himself wrote the manuscript, but destroyed it immediately after the performance.

Thomas Mann mentions some of the roles Chekhov played. He does not, however, indicate that Chekhov also wrote for example the full-length drama Without Fathers [Bezotcoviščina]. The manuscript of this and other dramatic works he wrote at this time have been lost and Mann might not have known about them. It seems that he was on the whole far less well acquainted with Chekhov's plays than with his stories. This might be due partly to

the fact that his interest probably lay more with Chekhov the novelist than with Chekhov the dramatist. However, Chekhov's early dramatic attempts require some attention because they revealed his capacity for close observation, for singling out and emphasizing specifically comic aspects, an ability which he put to good practical use during his student years in Moscow.

There is no indication that Chekhov at this early stage in Taganrog was convinced or even really aware of his talent; much less did he seriously consider making literature his career. Even so, this period helped to mould certain character traits which became very decisive for the nature of Chekhov's future relations to the society in which he lived and his attitude towards his writing.

The conditions under which he lived aroused in him a dislike for despotism and authority, a desire for independence and material freedom, but above all for spiritual freedom. In later years a deeper knowledge of human nature and the principles ruling society only served to strengthen this desire for independence of thought. It gradually developed into a scepticism towards any prescribed or traditional ideas, towards any prevailing, authoritative tendencies, whether political, economic or literary. Moreover, his sense of justice grew firm in surroundings where not individual merit, but social rank and position mattered, where fear and oppression, lying and cheating were the order of the day. His objectivity, sense of fairness and honesty, his hatred of hypocrisy, lies, vulgarity, of everything that debases the individual and prevents him from recognizing his own worth, all stem from this time. In a letter to his brother Michael (July, 1876) Chekhov writes:

. . . why do you call yourself my "insignificant and unnoticeable little brother." . . . Admit your insignificance, but do you know where? Before God, also before intelligence, beauty, nature, but

not before men. Among men one should be conscious of one's dignity. Surely you are not a rogue; you are an honest fellow. Well, respect the honest fellow in you and know that no honest fellow is insignificant.⁴³

Chekhov had developed a critical awareness of the society around him long before he developed a more serious critical attitude towards his art. This does not mean, however, that he was indiscriminative in relation to other literary works. On the contrary, through extensive reading a literary taste, which later became the criterion of his own works, began to be formed. In the above-mentioned letter for example Chekhov criticized Michael's liking for Mrs. Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because he found its overly-sweet sentimentality distasteful.

Having passed the final exams at the school in Taganrog, Chekhov followed the family to Moscow where he entered the faculty of medicine. Although Mann maintains that a medical career had been Chekhov's "sehnlicher Wunsch" (p.848), it is somewhat questionable whether Chekhov really had a deep desire to study medicine. Ernest J. Simmons in his biography of Chekhov states:

Though humanitarian urgings had no doubt played their part in Anton's selection of a medical career, the material security and the dignity attaching to the profession must have been overriding reasons for his choice.⁴⁴

The dire poverty and continuous financial insecurity of the family in Moscow, strengthened by his mother's entreaties, left him no alternative.

⁴³The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov, trans. and ed. S. S. Koteliansky and Philip Tomlinson (New York, 1965), p. 43. All subsequent quotations from this work will be indicated in footnotes und the title Life and Letters and the page number.

⁴⁴Ernest J. Simmons, Chekhov: A Biography (Toronto, 1962), p. 33.

During these first years in Moscow Chekhov's talent for the comic, which in Taganrog had been free to simply enjoy and unfold its own inventiveness, had to serve a purely utilitarian purpose. Chekhov became a writer for humorous magazines because he desperately needed money to finance his studies and to support the family. This, however, meant that he had to subject himself to the restrictions on form, style, and content which superficial, trivial magazines like the Dragonfly [Strekoza], Alarm-Clock [Budil'nik], Amusement [Razvlecheniye], Spectator [Zritel'], Fragments [Oskolki] and many others demanded. Such magazines flourished like mushrooms in the dark, repressive era of Alexander III and Pobedonostsev.

Mann aptly describes life in Russia at this time:

Es war erstickend, dumpf, leisetreterisch-devot, befuchtet und verschüchtert von brutaler Autorität, ein kommandiertes, zensuriertes, von Staats wegen angebrülltes und kriechendes Leben. '(p. 848)

Since any serious intellectual and artistic activity dealing with the social, political, and economic problems of the time was rigorously suppressed or strongly censored, the period became a time of stagnation, gloom and hopelessness. The insanity of Gleb Uspenski and the suicide of Garshin were symptomatic of the general depression, the loss of faith in ideals, in the future, in action as a means of changing the deplorable conditions.

Vladimir Yermilov, a well-known Soviet critic, wrote in his book Anton

Pavlovich Chekhov:

The censor hunted down the most ordinary "liberal" fooling. All these papers were forced to ring the changes on drunken merchants, caricaturing ad nauseam their jargon, on middle-class weddings, meek husbands, frivolous wives, "my friend the fireman," dressy ladies and dandies.

The heroes of the short stories, playlets, the subjects of the caricatures printed in the comic papers were townsfolk--clerks, postmen, cashiers, lawyers, doctors, artists, actors, teachers, and so on.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Vladimir Yermilov, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, trans. Ivy Litvinov (Moscow, n.d.), p. 44.

Chekhov had to conform to these low standards if he wanted his stories to be published.

His first stories were published in the Dragonfly and the Alarm-Clock until he found a constant market in the Fragments whose editor Leikin demanded three things: that the stories be brief, satirical (discreetly so, of course), and always, humorous. This meant the absolute absence of any serious elements. Chekhov's stories at first satisfied Leikin's requirements completely.

Neither the spirit of the period, nor the nature of these magazines, nor the attitude of their contributors was very conducive to aiding Chekhov in forming a positive opinion of his art. For a time Chekhov also worked as a journalist for the column "Fragments of Moscow Life." His opinion of journalists, as he declares in a letter to his brother Alexander, was the lowest:

A journalist means an envious liar, at the very least . . . and I am told that from afar I also am beginning to resemble the type. . . . I am now a journalist because I write much for the papers, but this is temporary. I will not die a journalist. (May 19, 1883)⁴⁶

Although Chekhov had hated this work, it proved invaluable in providing him with an extensive knowledge of all the facets of Moscow life, which became material for future stories. Similarly the mass-production of short stories at this time had beneficial effects. Necessity forced him to write an extraordinary number of stories, to write to the point of exhaustion under noisy and cramped conditions. However, during this time the groundwork was laid for the future development and establishment of a

⁴⁶Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics, sel. and ed. Louis Friedland (New York, 1964), p. 37. All subsequent quotations from this work will be indicated in footnotes under the title Letters on Literature and the page number.

genre, which up to that time had been considered of minor importance, as a legitimate, highly acclaimed form of art.

During his whole life Chekhov was always filled with doubts and scepticism concerning his work as a writer. During this first period of dependence upon the humorous magazines (which gradually lessened), his doubts stemmed from his lack of faith in the significance of his own talent. This was, as he confesses, largely the result of the negative criticism of his friends and other writers. In answer to D. W. Grigorovich's memorable letter (March, 1886), in which the esteemed novelist and critic advised Chekhov to respect his talent and not to waste it on literary trifles, Chekhov wrote:

If I have a gift that ought to be respected, then I confess before the purity of your heart that hitherto I have not respected it. I feel that I possess it, but I am accustomed to consider it insignificant. To make one unjust to oneself, morbidly imaginative and suspicious, causes of a purely external nature are sufficient. . . . All my intimate friends always looked upon my authorship condescendingly, and constantly gave me friendly advice not to exchange the real business for scribbling. . . . During the five years of my wanderings through newspaperdom I have also become imbued with this opinion of my literary insignificance. I soon became accustomed to look condescendingly upon my work. . . . I wrote my stories, mechanically, easily, caring nothing about the reader or about myself. (March 28, 1886)⁴⁷

Chekhov's summary of his inner state--a careless, lighthearted, condescending attitude towards his work--is not entirely true or perhaps just not complete. Although the first tales were full of simple, jolly, light humour, his stories fairly soon gained a serious undertone and grew ironic

⁴⁷Letters on Literature, p. 55-56. Mann also refers to sections of this quotation. His quotation, however, differs in one point. Mann quotes: "Um gegen sich selbst ungerecht, äusserst misstrauisch und hypochondrisch zu sein, gibt es für den Organismus genügend Ursachen . . ." (p.852), whereas Chekhov specifically mentions that they were causes "of a purely external nature." Mann's quotation permits him to interpret the cause of Chekhov's doubts, following the line of his own thoughts, as being mainly of an internal nature.

and satiric. Hand in hand with this growing seriousness came the desire and the demand for greater freedom to write according to his own wishes.

Thomas Mann, however, takes a completely different view of these early manifestations of Chekhov's comic vein. He recognizes in them the first indications of an emerging talent. "Es ist der primitive, der äffische Urgrund der Kunst, der da zum Vorschein kommt, das Talent, die gauklerische Lust und Gabe, zu amüsieren . . . " (p.848). For Th. Mann Chekhov's playful yet deprecatory attitude towards his art is characteristic of the state in which art is still unconscious of the fact that it really is art. In his essay "Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft" (1952) Mann describes it more closely as a state in which

. . . die berühmte Kunst sich in ihren individuellen Erscheinungen keineswegs wiedererkennt, sondern sich mehr oder weniger für einen neu erfundenen, privaten und absonderlichen Spass hält, der zu jener hochangesehenen Menschheitssache in keinerlei Beziehung zu bringen, und für den die Anteilnahme und Hochachtung der Welt in keiner Weise zu erwarten ist. Der Urheber solcher Spässe hat unbedingt nicht das Gefühl, einer besonders achtenswerten Beschäftigung obzuliegen.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Thomas Mann maintains in this same essay that, as long as the artist is unaware of the fact that his work is art and consequently regards it as something purely personal, written simply for his own enjoyment, he attaches no great significance to it. This idea, it seems, may really reflect Chekhov's attitude, for, even when Chekhov was forced to write for money in Moscow, the driving force behind his creative activity was still, at first, the simple love of fun, the desire to amuse. Yet, Mann continues, as soon as the artist begins to recognize that his work is art he becomes aware of "ihrer überpersönlichen Würde."⁴⁹ The realization

⁴⁸Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft," Werke, A.V., XI, p. 533.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 534.

that his work transcends the purely personal sphere places the writer in a new relation to society involving hitherto disregarded responsibilities.

Growing Critical Awareness

This process of becoming a conscious artist Thomas Mann describes in relation to Chekhov as follows:

Und nun geschieht etwas Merkwürdiges, das bezeichnend ist für den Geist und Eigenwillen der Literatur und zeigt welche unerwarteten Folgen es haben kann, wenn man sich, und sei es auf noch so zweckhafte, nebensächliche und scherzende Weise, überhaupt mit ihr einlässt. Dieser Geist "pocht an das Gewissen" (p.850).⁵⁰

Th. Mann had experienced this "Geist und Eigenwillen der Literatur" while working on the short story theme for The Magic Mountain. He now sees its power confirmed in Chekhov's turn towards a more serious depiction of life. It signifies essentially an elemental force, which, if it remains submerged too long in the subconscious of the artist, will force its way out of this semi-oblivion by awakening his conscience. Moreover, it compels him to be more scrutinizing and critical towards his art, to search for its meaning in relation to society, even though the artist initially had never intended this, had never meant his work to provide anything more than light amusement. Mann says of Chekhov's development:

Aber was ich das Merkwürdige, Bezeichnende, Unerwartete nannte, ist dies, dass allmählich, ohne dass er es eigentlich will und des Vorganges recht gewahr wird, in seine kleinen Feuilletons etwas eindringt, womit sie ursprünglich gar nichts zu tun haben wollten, etwas, das aus dem Gewissen der Literatur und zugleich aus dem eigenen, persönlichen Gewissen stammt: etwas zwar immer noch Lustiges und Unterhaltendes, zugleich aber Bitteres, Trauriges, Leben und Gesellschaft

⁵⁰Thomas Mann in statement quotes a section of Chekhov's letter to N. A. Leikin, August, 1883, in which Chekhov states: "Before me is my non-literary work mercilessly whipping my conscience . . . " (Life and Letters, p. 65). Th. Mann, however, refers the phrase "pocht an das Gewissen" to Chekhov's literary work, providing in this way an erroneous basis to his argument.

anklagend Blossstellendes, leidend Kritisches, kurz--Literarisches.
(p.850)

For Mann the more serious, critical element that began to enter Chekhov's works meant that an artist was gradually becoming aware of his role as an artist, that art was becoming conscious of itself as art. He saw in Chekhov a good example of his own ideas on the nature of the relationship between the artist and art in its early stages, an example of the "Geist und Eigenwillen der Literatur."

In some respects this interpretation undoubtedly characterizes Chekhov's inner development at the time. Chekhov began writing on more serious subjects not because he consciously considered himself an artist, but because he simply revolted against distorting life by portraying it only from the humorous side. We are inclined to think that it may have been Mann's "Gewissen der Literatur" which guided him, for in March, 1883, Chekhov writes to Leikin: "And, to tell the truth, it is hard to run after humour! . . . Against one's will one drifts into a serious region."⁵¹ In attempting to justify to Leikin this change he maintains in the same letter that a serious story, if written well, will certainly be read with pleasure.

It seems to me that a serious little thing, of say about a hundred lines will not hurt the reader's eye, the more so because in the Oskolki's [Fragments] headline there is nothing about "humorous and satirical," there are no restrictions in favour of unconditional humour. A little story (not mine, but generally), a slight thing, in the spirit of the journal, containing a plot and a suitable protest, is read with pleasure. . . .⁵²

Moreover, it may have been this "Gewissen der Literatur" which preserved Chekhov from the corrupting influence of the humorous magazines, for

⁵¹Life and Letters, p. 52

⁵²Ibid.

Chekhov at this time tried unconsciously, or led by his artistic instinct, "by all means not to lavish on the stories those images and pictures that were dear to me, and which, God knows why, I was treasuring and carefully hiding," as he writes in a letter to Grigorovich (March 28, 1886).⁵³ Mann quotes this section of Chekhov's letter to Grigorovich because it emphasizes his point that the "Geist und Eigenwillen der Literatur" guides and preserves the artist until he becomes conscious of his talent.

However true these observations of Thomas Mann may be, Chekhov was far from thinking in such particular terms as these about the early, unconscious state of art, about the link between a growing critical awareness of life and society and a developing talent. This indicates a difference of approach and emphasis between the two authors with regard to the problem of the nature of literature, of art and the artist. For Mann it constituted the central problem of his life. Nearly all his works deal in one way or another with the artist or the by nature chosen, elect one. Furthermore, in many of his essays the problem is elucidated from a philosophical point of view, from the standpoint mainly of the connection in art between the aesthetical and the ethical.

Since for Mann Chekhov belongs to this group of the "insgeheim Erkennen" (p.847), he regards the basic problem of Chekhov's life from his usual viewpoint, as the conflict between the artist and art. Consequently, for him Chekhov's negative attitude towards his early writings in Moscow is just the natural standpoint of an artist unaware of his own talent, who for this reason considers his work trivial, contemptible in relation to lofty art. This was probably partly true. However, just as Chekhov's conception of art differed from Mann's, so did the deeper reason for his doubts.

⁵³Letters on Literature, p. 56.

Mann's outlook on life and art was greatly influenced by the tradition of German idealistic philosophy. Chekhov, on the other hand, was much closer to the natural sciences and to positivism. He arrived at his opinions on art not by a priori metaphysical reasoning (as Mann often did), but through a close study of all the facets of life, through insight, observation and direct contact with the problems, the joys and sorrows people from all walks of life encounter from day to day.

Because Mann had always lacked such a direct contact with life, his artistic development, in his youth, naturally tended towards a pure aestheticism (fostered by German idealistic philosophy). However, on becoming aware of the dangers inherent in such an alienation from life, he consciously strove to bring art into a closer relation to it by seeking the ethical meaning he felt art should contain. Thus, at the time when he wrote his essay on Chekhov, the foundation of his concept on art was the idea that art is essentially ethical. Since Mann believed that Chekhov followed the general pattern of his own artistic development, he stresses in his interpretation of Chekhov the change from a purely aesthetical outlook on art to an awareness of the ethical responsibilities of the artist.

Chekhov, however, developed his impressionistic art from an outlook on life that is positivistic and almost materialistic, which denies any underlying spiritual, ethical purpose in life. He felt that the purpose of art is to give a completely true and objective picture of life as it is. Although such a standpoint may also be considered ethical to some extent, the emphasis lies on the manner of giving an objective portrayal, i.e. on the style. The aesthetical aspect was for Chekhov of major concern, rather than the particular subject about which he was writing. Chekhov, consequently, sees his own problem, not in the search for an ethical

purpose in art, but rather in the refinement of his aesthetical capability, regarding his early stories as the clumsy, unfinished, unpolished results of hurried work. This can explain the discrepancy existing between the importance Mann places on these early signs of a more serious attitude in Chekhov and the almost complete lack of recognition of their significance in Chekhov himself. The absence of true understanding for Chekhov's approach to art among his contemporaries simply added to the insecurity he felt in his first tentative steps in a new direction.

Thomas Mann's interpretation of the nature of Chekhov's doubts during his first period of literary activity must yet be analysed more closely in context with Mann's own ideas about the artist's scepticism at the time when he wrote the essay, for they form the basis of his entire interpretation of Chekhov.

According to Mann, the artist regards his creative activity at this early stage as strictly personal, as something of an aesthetical game. Any moral obligations towards society he considers to be irrelevant to his own work, "denn man weiss ja, dass der Künstler kein ursprünglich moralisches Wesen, sondern ein Ästhetisches ist, dass sein Grundtrieb das Spiel ist und nicht die Tugend. . . ." ⁵⁴ The artist as an aesthetical being considers any moral, political, social criticism "als ein Überschreiten seiner Grenzen, als ein Verstoss gegen die Bescheidenheit." ⁵⁵ The writer's "Bescheidenheit" is apparent not only in the narrow limits he sets his own activity, but also in his profound feeling of reverence towards art.

⁵⁴Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . .," A.V., XI, p. 530.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 531.

In relation to this exalted art he feels "klein bis zum Unglauben daran, dass er überhaupt mit ihr zu tun und irgendwie teil hat an ihrer Würde."⁵⁶ Scepticism and a certain shyness continue to determine his attitude even at a time when he is honoured by success and fame. "Er hegt eine tiefe Scheu vor der Verwürdigung seines Daseins, eine schamhafte Scheu, denn zuerst und vor allem ist sie die Scham des Künstlers vor der Kunst."⁵⁷

Thomas Mann sympathizes with the artist's struggle against the conception that he should aim at improving the world in his writing by means of moral doctrine.

Der Künstler "verbessere" die Welt auf eine ganz andere Weise [Mann writes] als durch moralische Lehre, nämlich indem er sein Leben--und auf eine stellvertretende Weise das Leben überhaupt im Wort, im Bild, im Gedanken befestige, ihm Sinn und Form verleihe und die Erscheinung durchsichtig mache für das, was Goethe "des Lebens Leben" nannte: den Geist. Unmöglich könnte ich ihm widersprechen, wenn er darauf bestände, Belebung in jedem Sinn, das sei die Aufgabe der Kunst--und sonst nichts.⁵⁸

Mann, however, points out that even at this early stage, although the artist propounds an apparently purely aesthetical view, he cannot exclude all moral elements. He maintains that it would be fallacious to think that "Belebung in jedem Sinn" dispenses a writer from any moral judgment. Since the writer must make use of words in order to reproduce life in art, the particular choice he makes involves selection and rejection, i.e. a critical attitude. Mann states: "Das Wort. Ist es denn nicht Kritik in sich selbst. . . . Kritik des Lebens und als solche der Welt nie recht bequem."⁵⁹ Thus according to Mann, a word comprises not only sound (form), but also meaning.

⁵⁶Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . . ," A.V. XI, p. 531.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 534.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 531.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 535.

Mann maintains further that as soon as the artist realizes that his writing cannot be purely aesthetical, he begins to recognize and understand the principles underlying his existence as an artist. These principles Mann defines as:

Erkenntnis und Form--beide zugleich und auf einmal. Das Besondere ist, dass dieses Beides für ihn [the artist] eine organische Einheit bildet, worin eines das andere bedingt, fordert, hervorbringt. Diese Einheit ist ihm Geist, Schönheit, Freiheit--alles.⁶⁰

Formerly the artist had rejected to a large extent the results of his capacity for "Erkenntnis" as belonging outside the sphere of art. He now recognizes that this capacity forms an essential part of his nature. It raises him intellectually and spiritually high above the ordinary mass of people and permits him to see its deficiencies clearly. This new understanding alters his attitude towards reality, life and society. It results in criticism, opposition, and a feeling of spiritual superiority in relation to the general stupidity of mankind which manifests itself "zugleich als Form- und als Erkenntnislosigkeit." Mann explains: "Es ist die Stellung des geistigen Menschen gegen ein obstinates, dumm-schlechtes Menschenwesen."⁶¹

The artist's criticism, Mann further declares, is directed not only towards life and society, but also towards his own creative activity. "Tatsächlich aber ist aller Kunst ein kritisches Element eingeboren--unentbehrlich jeder disziplinierten Produktivität und zunächst also eine Sache der Selbstzucht. . . ."⁶² A writer must analyze, criticize, and evaluate his own work, keeping in mind at all times his ultimate aim, the unity

⁶⁰Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . . ," A.V., XI, p. 536.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., p. 535.

between "Erkenntnis und Form," this unity which is "Geist, Schönheit, Freiheit," in other words, art. Yet doubts begin to arise in the artist as to whether his talent can meet the challenge of this lofty goal. Irony towards himself, out of a feeling of inferiority, and towards society, out of a feeling of superiority, is the logical result of his capacity for "Erkenntnis."

The artist, however, can only criticize, according to Th. Mann, if he has in mind something higher and better. His concept of "good" becomes his criterion of criticism. It embraces both the ideal of aesthetical and ethical perfection. Mann writes:

Tatsächlich schwebt alle Kunst in der Doppeldeutigkeit dieses Wortes "gut," in dem das Ästhetische und Moralische sich treffen, vermischen, ununterscheidbar werden, dessen Sinn übers bloss Ästhetische hinausreicht ins überhaupt Zustimmungswürdige und hinauf bis zur höchsten, gebietenden Idee der Vollendung.⁶³

Art, as the idea of highest perfection, is an idea of unity--the unity between the ethical and the aesthetical, between "Erkenntnis und Form." Th. Mann admits that in the early stage, when art is not yet aware of "ihrer überpersönlichen Würde," that which is aesthetically bad is not regarded as morally evil, i.e. detrimental to the rest of mankind. However, Mann continues, the moment the artist recognizes, through his capacity for "Erkenntnis," the nature of his relation, his responsibility towards society, he begins to understand this essential unity. Mann asserts:

In der Welt des Lebens und der menschlichen Gesellschaft aber ist das Schlechte, Dumme und Falsche auch das Böse, nämlich das Menschenunwürdige und Verderbliche, und sobald der Kritizismus der Kunst sich nach aussen wendet, sobald er gesellschaftlich wird, wird er moralisch, wird der Künstler zum sozialen Moralisten.⁶⁴

⁶³Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . . ," A.V., XI, p. 537.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Once the artist, according to Mann, becomes aware of the critical element inherent in art, he begins to realize, since criticism is based upon the concept "good," that his writing is not only aesthetical, but also ethical. He becomes conscious of the fact that as he objectifies, portrays his inner world, he is of necessity also giving a reflection of the outer world. This forces him to admit "[die] Unteilbarkeit des Problems der Humanität." In order to portray "die Totalität des Menschlichen" in his art, the artist must strive to incorporate all spheres of human knowledge within himself. "Das Ästhetische, das Moralische, das Politisch-Gesellschaftliche sind eins in ihm,"⁶⁵ Mann says. It is no wonder then that a writer feels powerless at times before his high ideal in view of the endless problems that life, society, the human being present to him, and that he is overcome with a feeling of inferiority when he regards masterpieces of art that have somehow managed to create this unity.

The Connection Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical

Returning to Thomas Mann's essay on Chekhov, one notices that these ideas also govern Mann's interpretation of Chekhov's development.

In quoting a biographer of Chekhov, who wrote that "Für die Entwicklung Tschechows erscheint, im Zusammenhang mit seinem Aufstieg zur Meisterschaft der Form, bemerkenswert sein verändertes Verhältnis zu seiner Zeit . . . ,"⁶⁶ Mann remarks that what interested him most in this statement was

. . . die Statuierung eines Zusammenhangs zwischen dem Aufstieg zur Meisterschaft der Form und der Zunahme moralisch-zeitkritischer Reizbarkeit, das heisst: dem immer sich verstärkenden Gefühl für das ge-

⁶⁵Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . . ," A.V., XI, p. 538.

⁶⁶Unfortunately I was unable to ascertain which biography was used by Th. Mann.

sellschaftlich Verurteilte und Dahinsinkende und für das, was da kommen soll; des Zusammenhangs also des Ästhetischen und des Ethischen. (p.860)

Mann sees in Chekhov's awakening critical attitude--criticism which is directed not only towards society but also towards his writing--this gradual unification of the aesthetical and ethical. He writes:

. . . die kritische Traurigkeit und Aufsässigkeit ist ja das Verlangen nach einer besseren Wirklichkeit, einer reineren, wohlgefälligeren menschlichen Gesellschaft, und dieses Verlangen bildet sich ab in der Sprache, in der Verpflichtung zu künstlerischer Arbeit an ihr, einer "erbarmungslosen" Verpflichtung, die unbedingt zu dem gehört, was eindringt in Antoscha's lockere Schreiberei. (p.851)

Once this unity has been achieved, according to Mann, it alone justifies a literary work, gives it meaning and value, social and moral significance. The artist, in recreating his own inner world mirrors all of humanity, thus helping man to understand himself. He not only makes him aware of his plight and problems, but also gives him a glimpse of something better. In his art he himself gives mankind an example of the possibility of realizing, of giving form to what one desires and recognizes as good. Mann states in relation to Chekhov's work: "Liegt vielleicht in dieser selbst, und sehe sie noch so sehr nach blosser Belustigung aus, etwas Sittliches, Dienstliches, Soziales, das am Ende sogar zu der 'rettenden Wahrheit' hinführt, nach welcher eine ratlose Welt die Hände reckt?" (p.859).⁶⁷

Outwardly Chekhov's early attitude towards life and art seems to verify Mann's idea that a desire for aesthetical improvement goes hand in hand with an ethical awareness of the world. Not only did his stories,

⁶⁷In this statement Mann refers to the sentence in Walter Muschg's Tragische Literaturgeschichte which has already been mentioned in the introduction. This sentence, "Er ergötzt eine verlorene Welt, ohne ihr die Spur einer rettenden Wahrheit in die Hand zu geben," Mann quoted not only in his letter to Friedrich H. Weber, July 18, 1954, but he also made it one of the leitmotivs of his essay on Chekhov. (See p. 10, n. 32.)

almost against his will, begin to reflect his more serious outlook on life, but they also improved stylistically, so that a few of these early stories were already masterpieces.

However, the question still remains as to whether there was a direct link between the aesthetical and the ethical, a cause and effect relationship, as Mann had thought. Furthermore, whether the growing seriousness of Chekhov's works at this time signified that his ethical awareness, his criticism of society had merged with his art, finding a focal point and harmonizing center in the artist himself.

A certain discrepancy can be noticed even in some of the early stories between Chekhov's personal attitudes, his criticisms and aims in life and the standpoint towards similar ideas expressed in his literary work. This discrepancy existed because Chekhov's growing critical awareness manifested itself in different ways in his life and his art. His personal attitudes did not find their reflection in his stories, because his principles on art did not permit this. Consequently, instead of a cause and effect relationship, Chekhov's critical attitude resulted in separate, and sometimes even paradoxical tendencies. Instead of linking these elements, Chekhov consciously strove to divorce his principles in respect to life from those on art.

In analyzing first Chekhov's conception of how life should be depicted in art, I should like to examine subsequently how Mann's interpretation differed from Chekhov's own standpoint. Secondly, a clarification of Chekhov's attitude towards his own personal life and the role it plays in relation to his artistic work will help to shed yet further light upon a basic difference between Mann's ideas on the nature of the artist, as exemplified by Chekhov, and Chekhov's own view.

Love of truth and freedom formed the basis of all Chekhov's activity. In his art it manifested itself in a striving for complete objectivity, a scientific objectivity. Chekhov had come to admire the impartial, scientific method of analysis through his study of medicine. Consequently he felt that literature, if it is objective, cannot be purely humorous since life is mainly serious, that a writer cannot depict only the beautiful when so much ugliness exists. In a letter to Mme. M. V. Kissielyov, January 14, 1887, he explains:

To chemists there is nothing unclean on earth. And a writer has to be just as objective as a chemist; he must renounce everyday subjectivity and remember that muck-heaps in a landscape play a very respectable part, and that evil passions are as peculiar to life as good ones.⁶⁸

He rejects the objection that a depiction of the ugly side of life may not be moral, that it may have a corrupting influence on society. He counters such thoughts by asserting that no-one has yet been able to establish conclusively whether literature really does have a corrupting influence. Furthermore, he asserts that tastes change with time, so that for example "even descriptions of peasants and officials below the rank of titular councillor"⁶⁹ were once condemned. An artist, if he is honest, cannot give a distorted picture of life just to conform to prevalent moral dictates.

Chekhov, moreover, makes a distinction between the personal moral standards of a writer and the morals of the characters he depicts in his stories. A writer does not necessarily present his own views in his writing and should, therefore, not be identified with them. Chekhov felt

⁶⁸Life and Letters, p. 83.

⁶⁹Ibid.

that a writer cannot be judged from a moral point of view, since the criterion of judgment, the work itself and its possible effect on society, may be misleading when applied to the author himself. He states in the above-mentioned letter to Mme. M. V. Kissielyov:

I do not know who is right: Homer, Shakespeare, Lope-da-Vega, the ancients generally, who were not afraid to rummage in the "muck-heap" but in the moral sense were much more stable than we are, or the modern writers, decorous on paper but coldly cynical in their souls and in their lives (January 14, 1887).⁷⁰

Since, as Chekhov continues, "everything in this world is relative and approximate,"⁷¹ he feels that no final conclusion can be made in moral issues. He revolts against the naive tendency common at the time which contended that literature, since it has an underlying moral obligation towards society, should portray only the good and the beautiful in man. Chekhov retorts:

Human nature is imperfect, and therefore it would be strange to see on earth none but the righteous. To believe that it is the duty of literature to dig out "pearls" from the heap of scoundrels is to reject literature itself. Fiction is called artistic because it draws life as it actually is. Its aim is absolute and honest truth. (Letter to Mme. M. V. Kissielyov, January 14, 1887.)⁷²

Chekhov's reasons for objecting against such moral obligations differ from those of Mann. Mann's objections are based on the fact that the artist at first simply does not want to acknowledge that art is basically ethical. Even later, Mann says, he retains an attachment for the "noch ganz individuellen, ganz nutzlosen und frei-spielerischen Früh-Zustand der Kunst, da Kunst noch nicht wusste, dass sie 'Kunst' sei und über sich selber lachte."⁷³

⁷⁰Life and Letters, p. 82.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 83.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Thomas Mann, "Der Künstler und . . . ," A.V., XI, p. 534.

Chekhov's objections are more fundamental. They do not arise out of a desire to preserve a personal, subjective, lighthearted, playful attitude towards his work, nor out of a fear of the responsibility which an awareness of his ethical relationship to the world entail. Rather his objections grow out of the realization that a personal, subjective art, a depiction of life from the artist's ethical point of view, cannot be objective. It cannot depict life as it really is. Chekhov, following his positivistic outlook, felt that life does not have moral principles as a foundation.

Already the three early stories which Th. Mann mentions, "Death of a Government Clerk" ("Der Tod des Beamten"), 1883, "Fat and Thin" ("Der Dicke und der Dünne"), 1883, and "A Delinquent" ("Ein Delinquent"), 1885, show how Chekhov attempted to achieve objectivity in his writing. Regardless of his personal standpoint with regard to the deplorable situations described in these stories, Chekhov depicts all aspects of the situations leaving the reader free to draw his own conclusions. This impartiality governs Chekhov's attitude in relation to all the problems, all the questions which arise out of situations he portrays in his art. He states in a letter to Souvorin:

It seems to me that it is not the business of novelists to solve such questions as those of God, pessimism, and the like. The novelist's business is only to describe who has been speaking or thinking about God or pessimism, how, and in what circumstances. An artist must not be judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an impartial witness. I hear a vague discussion between two Russians on pessimism, a conversation which solves nothing, and I must report it just as I heard it; the judgment of it will be made by the jury--that is, the the readers (May 30, 1888).⁷⁴

It is the artist's duty only to state correctly the questions potentially inherent in life, not to answer them. He must be able "to distinguish important evidence from unimportant," Chekhov continues in the same letter,

⁷⁴Life and Letters, p. 110.

"to present the characters and to speak in their language"⁷⁵ in such a way as to make the potential question visible to the reader.

According to Mann, however, the specific words an author chooses already denote a degree of criticism on the part of the author. Chekhov's difficulty was, therefore, to choose those words which had the least possible moral overtones, since otherwise there would be a preforming of the reader's opinion and a loss of objectivity. That is one reason why Chekhov, for example, makes so much use of dialogue. In this way only the thoughts and ideas of the characters, the situation itself, can influence the reader. Mann, however, believed that the ethical element (the author's personal standpoint) cannot be eliminated regardless of how carefully the words are chosen. On the contrary, he felt that the artist should choose such words which best give form to the ethical, critical awareness of the author. This attitude inclined Mann to be concerned mainly with the ideas expressed in Chekhov's stories, which he regarded as a reflection of Chekhov's own standpoint, rather than with the situations and characters themselves.

Here a basic difference between Thomas Mann's interpretation of Chekhov and Chekhov's own attitude becomes apparent. Chekhov's premise in relation to art is an objectivity requiring the complete elimination of any interference from the artist's own subjective world, so that life can pass undisturbed, directly into art. Doubts about the success of this attempt became a source of scepticism in Chekhov.

At the core of Mann's interpretation lies the idea of the identity between the inner world of the artist and the world he depicts in literature, of the organic unity between life and the artist on the one hand, and the

⁷⁵Life and Letters, p. 110.

artist and art on the other. As the critical awareness of the artist grows, his outlook broadens, embraces more of the world and thus becomes increasingly objective and ethical in relation to mankind. In essence, however, the depiction of life remains subjective, since it must pass through the artist's soul. According to Mann, the scepticism and irony of the artist towards his work originate from his doubts as to whether he has managed, by depicting his own inner world, to give an objective picture of the world around him, whether he succeeded, by giving form to his own ideas, in making them identical with life as it is outside his personal sphere. These thoughts belong to the late period of Mann's creativity. In his youth Mann adhered more to the idea of "l'art pour l'art." He only gradually acquired the concept of a unity between life and art, developed particularly at the time of writing the tetralogy Joseph and His Brothers.

Because Chekhov does not allow his personal ideas, his capacity for "Erkenntnis" to have any influence on his art, it cannot be ethical along the lines of Mann's concept. Chekhov does not interpret the meaning of life, analyze, define, and criticize it. On the contrary, since the artist is only an impartial witness and simply states the facts, he must appeal to the reader's capacity for "Erkenntnis" and not, like Mann, to the artist's. Chekhov expects the readers to interpret the facts and to judge them.

The readers, as well as noted critics of the time, however, misunderstood Chekhov. They expected of him some sort of statement, some kind of standpoint with regard to the basic problems of life. The protest they sensed in the questions his stories presented to them, left many readers dissatisfied. Since they anticipated not only questions, but also answers, they misconceived the nature of this protest. It was not Chekhov's

protest, but the protest inherent in many of life's situations. It was directed precisely against a distorting of life by defining it, pressing it into concepts, giving answers to it. Chekhov's aim, as he writes in a letter to A. N. Plescheyev, was only to depict such situations in which this protest is clearest:

. . . to paint life faithfully and to show by the way how far that life deviates from the norm. The norm is unknown to me [Chekhov says], as it is to any of us. We all know what a dishonest act is, but what honour is we do not know. I shall keep to the framework nearest to my heart, which has already been tried by men stronger and wiser than I. The framework is the absolute freedom of man, freedom from violence, from prejudices, ignorance, the devil, freedom from passions, etc.
(April 9, 1889)⁷⁶

Chekhov felt that life cannot be defined by concepts and norms, that there is no answer to its basic problems. Consequently, any norm which pretends to capture the principles governing life, was for him a sign of prejudice and ignorance, revealing a lack of knowledge of its true nature.

It might be argued that Chekhov took part in this protest indirectly, through the choice of themes and situations. His choice, however, was not based on criticism or any concept of "good," which formed the foundation of Mann's ethical concept. The sole factor governing Chekhov's choice was complete objectivity, the desire to portray life as it is.

In order to be objective, Chekhov felt that he must free himself from prejudice and ignorance. In a letter to A. N. Plescheyev he explains:

I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and who want to see in me either a liberal or a conservative. . . . I should like to be a free artist, and nothing more, and I grieve that God has not given me the power to be one. I hate falsehood and violence in all their aspects. . . . Pharisaism, stupidity and arbitrariness reign not in shopkeepers houses and prisons alone. I detect them in science, in literature and in the younger generation. . . . I look upon trade-marks and labels as prejudices. My Holy of Holies is the human body, health, mind, talent, inspiration, life and the most absolute

⁷⁶Life and Letters, p. 154.

of freedom--freedom from violence and falsehood in whatever they may be manifested. This is the programme I would follow if I were a great artist (October, 1889).⁷⁷

Chekhov's desire for complete freedom could be regarded as a striving towards a purely aesthetical art, a striving away from any unity of the aesthetical with the ethical. This is, however, only apparently so, for Chekhov's aim is only for freedom from norms. He did hope that the reader would observe behind his objective portrayal of life the "dishonest act," the ethical element potentially inherent in the questions his stories pose. However, he considered any general ethical conclusion unwarranted, a false undertaking resulting of necessity in prejudice.

Chekhov's striving for objectivity, for truth, for absolute freedom, his antipathy for theories and doctrines, would at times result in a pessimistic appraisal of all knowledge. In a letter to Souvorin he writes:

Scheglov-Leontiev blames me for finishing the story with the phrase: "There's no making out anything in this world." In his opinion a psychological writer must make out--that's his business as a psychologist. But I do not agree with him. For writing fellows, particularly for artists, it is time to confess that one can't make out anything in this world, as once Sokrates confessed, and Voltaire too. The mob thinks it knows and understands everything; and the stupider it is the wider it fancies its outlook to be. If an artist in whom the mob believes will make up his mind to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees, that, in itself, will be a great gain in the sphere of thought and a great step forward (May 30, 1888).⁷⁸

Although such a pessimistic outburst is not typical of Chekhov, since his outlook on life was generally much more positive and joyful, the lack of any ultimate direction or absolute principle did make Chekhov doubt his ability as a great artist. He writes in a letter to Souvorin:

Remember that the writers whom we call eternal or simply good and who intoxicate us have one common and very important characteristic: they get somewhere, and they summon you there, and you feel, not with your

⁷⁷Life and Letters, p. 167.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 110-111. Perhaps Mann's quotation of Chekhov, "dass 'das Leben ein auswegloses Problem ist'" (p.864) is taken from this letter.

mind, but with your whole being, that they have a certain purpose and, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, do not come and excite the imagination for nothing. Some--it depends on their calibre--have immediate objects: abolition of serfdom, liberation of the country, politics, beauty or simply vodka, like Denis Davydov; others have remote aims; God, the life beyond, the happiness of mankind, and so on. The best of them are realistic and paint life as it is, but because every line is permeated, as with a juice, by awareness of a purpose, you feel, besides life as it is, also life as it ought to be, and this captivates you (November 25, 1892).⁷⁹

Thus a great artist, according to Chekhov, should make the reader feel in his work, "besides life as it is, also life as it ought to be." Th. Mann had already expressed this idea when he said that a literary work should not only be aesthetical, but also ethical. Chekhov, however, makes it quite clear that he can only depict "life as it is," concluding from this that his talent is mediocre and insignificant. He continues in the letter to Souvorin:

And we? We! We paint life as it is. . . . Beyond that, even if you lashed us with whips, we could not go. We have neither immediate nor remote aims and in our souls--a great emptiness. We have no politics, we do not believe in revolution, we have no God, we are not afraid of ghosts, and I personally have no fear even of death and blindness. He who desires nothing, hopes for nothing, and is afraid of nothing, cannot be an artist. Whether it is a disease or not--the name doesn't matter; but it must be owned our situation is worse than bad. (November 25, 1892)⁸⁰

Out of this feeling of spiritual stagnation and emptiness Chekhov turned to Tolstoy, for Tolstoy embodied for him a writer with a goal, a purpose, a tendency, everything Chekhov in the depths of his soul felt he could never be. In a letter to M. O. Menshikov Chekhov himself describes his opinion of Tolstoy as follows:

⁷⁹Life and Letters, p. 211.

⁸⁰Ibid. Mann also quotes from this letter the sentence: "Wir zeichnen nur das Leben, wie es ist . . . und weiter tun wir keinen Schritt" (p.858).

If he were to die there would be a big vacuum in my life. Firstly, I never loved anyone as I love him. I am not a believing man, but of all beliefs I consider his faith the nearest and most akin to me. Secondly, while Tolstoy is in literature it is easy and pleasant to be a writer; even to be aware that one has done nothing and is doing nothing is not so terrible, since Tolstoy does enough for all. His work serves as the justification of all the hopes and anticipations built upon literature. Thirdly, Tolstoy stands firmly, his authority is immense, and while he lives, bad tastes in literature, banality of every kind, impudent or lachrymose, all the bristling, exasperated vanities will remain far away, deep in the shade. His moral authority alone is capable of maintaining on a certain height the so-called literary moods and currents (January 28, 1900).⁸¹

Throughout his life Chekhov loved Tolstoy's spirit of independence, admired his artistic power, and respected his moral authority, since as he said, it ensures a generally high literary standard.

On the other hand, Chekhov disliked such unquestioned authority since he felt it resulted in conceit and over-confidence, a lack of scepticism, and, consequently, in error and misconception. "Damn the philosophy of the mighty ones of this world!" he writes to Souvorin, "All great sages are as despotic as generals, and as ignorant and indelicate as generals, because they are confident of impunity" (September 8, 1891).⁸² Tolstoy's philosophy repelled Chekhov, as did any doctrinary belief which revealed an ignorance of even basic scientific facts. The extremely reactionary moral guidelines for life which Tolstoy drew from his philosophy were completely antagonistic to Chekhov's own standpoint in relation to life.

Chekhov was a positivist, or as Th. Mann says, "ein Mann der Wissenschaft und des Glaubens an sie als Fortschrittsmacht" (p.845). Whereas Chekhov in relation to his art demanded of himself complete impartiality,

⁸¹Life and Letters, p. 273.

⁸²Ibid., p. 191. Th. Mann also quotes this statement, rightfully relating it to Chekhov's anger at Tolstoy's derogatory opinion of doctors. Chekhov says: "Tolstoy abuses doctors as scoundrels and allows himself to remain in ignorance of great questions because he is just such a Diogenes who won't be taken to the police station nor be abused in the newspapers" (Life and Letters, p. 191).

in his own personal life his positive outlook, his faith in scientific progress as a means of aiding mankind, became apparent. His whole life, as he explains in a letter to Souvorin, was in fact a struggle to free himself from social conditions that were based on the slavery and degradation of man:

What noble writers receive from nature gratis, the writers of the rank and file purchase at the cost of their youth. Do, please, write a story of how a young man, the son of a serf, who has been a shopboy, a chorister, a pupil of a secondary school and a university graduate, who has been brought up to respect rank and to kiss the priest's hand, to bow to other people's ideas, to be thankful for each morsel of bread, who . . . played the hypocrite both to God and man without any need but merely out of consciousness of his own insignificance--describe how that young man squeezes the slave out of him drop by drop, and how, awakening one fine morning, he feels running in his veins no longer the blood of a slave but genuine human blood. . . . (January 7, 1889)⁸³

Chekhov's faith in action, in struggle, as a means of improving man's lot, was the reason for his rejection of Tolstoy's moral ideas, which aimed at preserving the social conditions of the past. He regarded "die Weisheit des 'Widerstehe nicht dem Bösen,' die passive Resistenz, die Verachtung von Kultur und Fortschritt . . . recht eigentlich als reaktionäres Gefackel" (p.845), Th. Mann says. Chekhov writes of Tolstoy's morality in a letter to Souvorin:

Tolstoyan morality has ceased to move me; at the bottom of my heart I regard it with no amicable feeling, and of course that is not just. There is peasant blood in my veins and you cannot astonish me with peasant virtues. From the days of my childhood I have believed in progress. . . . reason and justice tell me that in electricity and in steam there is more love of man than there is in chastity and abstinence from meat (March 27, 1894).⁸⁴

⁸³Life and Letters, pp. 145-146.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 217.

In life, Chekhov's search for truth found one answer: science. Any "truths," in his opinion, which are not based upon objective, impartial, scientific facts are nothing but conjecture. Truth, he declared in a letter to Souvorin, is of necessity materialistic, scientific.

Everything alive on the earth is by necessity materialistic. In animals, in savages, in Moscow merchants, everything that is spiritual, non-animal, is conditioned by their unconscious instinct, but all the rest is material and certainly not of their own choice. Beings of a higher order, thinking men, also, are found to be materialists by necessity. They seek for truth in matter, for there is nowhere else for them to seek it, since they see, hear, and sense matter alone. . . . To forbid a man the materialistic conception is equivalent to forbidding him to seek the truth. Outside matter there is neither experience nor knowledge, and therefore no truth (May 7, 1889).⁸⁵

Chekhov held science in such high esteem out of a deep love, sympathy, and compassion for man, a fervid desire to help, for science meant progress, change and improvement. It was this love for man Chekhov felt lacking in Tolstoy's morality.

Thomas Mann, in explaining Chekhov's antipathy for Tolstoy's moral theories, also bases it on the fact that Chekhov was a positivist and at times even expressed himself as a materialist, referring to the passage on Tolstoy's morality already quoted further above. However, Mann regards Chekhov's positivistic convictions as the sole factor influencing Chekhov's relation to Tolstoy. He does not mention or explain why he succumbed to such a degree and for so many years to his power. In a letter to Souvorin Chekhov writes:

But Tolstoyan philosophy moved me profoundly and held me for six or seven years; and it was not the fundamental principles, which were familiar to me before, that affected me, but the Tolstoyan manner of expressing himself, his sagacity, and probably a kind of hypnotism (March 27, 1894).⁸⁶

⁸⁵Life and Letters, p. 158.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 217.

The fascination which Tolstoy's artistic power had for Chekhov is, however, of importance, since it helps to clarify the nature and strength of Chekhov's doubts, his insecurity in relation to his art.⁸⁷ It makes apparent that the lack of conviction in the greatness of his own talent was induced by a paradoxical inclination in Chekhov's artistic nature. On the one hand Chekhov had a desire for complete objectivity and on the other a yearning for a firm philosophical outlook, which he felt a great artist must have. Although Chekhov had no final answers to the questions of life, his opinion that an artist should remain impartial would not permit him to incorporate into the sphere of his literary work even his positivistic standpoint towards life, an admiration for active, productive and purposeful men. During a period of spiritual depression in which Chekhov's objectivity reduced him to a state of helplessness in a world where "one can't make out anything," his own artistic convictions weakened. Tolstoy's personality, his moral authority, was able to fill this spiritual emptiness and need for decisiveness. Yet his influence could only be temporary since it was fundamentally opposed to Chekhov's artistic principles.

Chekhov's positivism was, therefore, not the major reason, as Mann thought, for the change that finally occurred in his attitude towards Tolstoy. Chekhov explains to Souvorin: "But the point is not in that, not in the 'pro and con,' but in this: that in one way or another Tolstoy has passed for me, he is in my soul no more, he has departed from me, saying, 'I leave

⁸⁷The only reference Mann makes to the fact that Chekhov was once fascinated by Tolstoy is in a quotation from Chekhov's letter to Souvorin, December 17, 1890, where he states: "And what a sour creature I would have been now had I sat at home! Before my trip [to the island of Sachalin] the 'Kreuzer Sonata' seemed an event and now just absurd and ridiculous" (Life and Letters, p. 185).

thy house empty'" (March 27, 1894).⁸⁸ Only after Tolstoy's "hypnotic spell" had broken did Chekhov's positivistic scepticism of Tolstoy, which had very likely always existed, come into the foreground. Although Mann says "Höflichkeit, pflichtschuldige Ehrerbietung nebst einiger Ironie bestimmten überhaupt sein Verhältnis zu dem Gewaltigen von Jasnaja Poljana" this was actually Chekhov's true attitude towards Tolstoy only after his influence had ceased.

With regard to the paradoxical tendency in Chekhov's artistic nature one other factor in his development is of importance. It is his attempt at writing a novel. E. J. Simmons writes that Chekhov

realized that the short story did not provide scope for either the correct formulation of serious moral and social problems or the "new word" which some of his critics were demanding. The novel in Russia had been the traditional medium for ambitious authors who aspired to impressive artistic achievement and also believed they had something important to say. Apparently Chekhov thought he was ready to make the attempt.⁸⁹

The basic reason for this attempt was a desire to find the "new word" that was needed to overcome what he regarded as a serious limitation and flaw in his talent, his inability to give to his work some underlying purpose or goal. Such a long work would require of him some unifying idea, some central focus. He felt such an underlying idea would give a literary work more power, vitality, and significance, whereas without it a work would be flabby, miserable, and dull. He occasionally held such an opinion of his own as well as his contemporaries' literary efforts. He asks Souvorin in a letter: "Tell me frankly, now, who of my contemporaries, that is men between the ages of 30 and 45, have given the world even one drop of alcohol? Are

⁸⁸Life and Letters, p. 217.

⁸⁹Simmons, pp. 133-134.

not Korolenko, Nadson, and all the playwrights of today mere lemonade? " (November 25, 1892).⁹⁰

Chekhov never did complete a novel, explaining the reasons for the continual delay by the fact that he still did not have "a firm political, religious, and philosophical outlook; I change it monthly," he writes to Grigorovich, "and therefore I'm compelled to limit myself to the description of how my heroes love, marry, produce children, die and how they speak" (October 9, 1888).⁹¹ Since Chekhov never attained such a firm outlook, he continued writing, on the whole, in the genre he loved, the short story.

Moreover, Chekhov's dislike for longwindedness, the superfluous in writing, which later made him a master in the brief, compact, terse style so suited to the short story, further hindered his attempts in the novel form. His failure, in spite of a serious endeavour, to expand his writing, he described for example in connection with the story "The Steppe" ["Step"], 1888. He writes in a letter to V. G. Korolenko:

The subject is a good one; I write it happily, but unfortunately from lack of practice in writing long things, from fear of writing what is superfluous, I fall into the other extreme: each page turns out as compact as a short story, the pictures accumulate and crowd together, and, obstructing each other, spoil the general impression. In the result one gets, not a picture in which all the details, like the stars in the sky, merge into one whole, but a conspectus, a dry record of impressions (January 9, 1888).⁹²

Of significance here is the connection between his short story style and his inability, and later also his unwillingness, to give his works an underlying, general idea or guiding thread. Because Chekhov did not have a

⁹⁰Life and Letters, p. 210.

⁹¹Simmons, p. 161. Since this letter is not among the selected letters in Life and Letters and Letters on Literature, I had to quote from this secondary source.

⁹²Life and Letters, p. 101.

firm purpose or guiding principle, Chekhov thought that he lacked the basic prerequisite for the writing of novels and had to remain, therefore, of necessity with the short story. Furthermore, as has already been stated, Chekhov always considered these general ideas to be the entirely personal, relative and subjective viewpoint of the author. The concentrated form of the short story, however, Chekhov declares in a letter to Souvorin, leaves no room for any subjective interference from the author.

Of course, it would be pleasant to combine art with sermonizing, but for me personally it is exceedingly difficult and almost impossible owing to my technique. In order to describe horse thieves in 700 lines I must all the time speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit. Otherwise, were I to slip into subjectivity, the images would become vague and the story would not be as compact as short stories ought to be. When I write I reckon entirely upon the reader, trusting him to add the subjective elements which are lacking in the story (April 1, 1890).⁹³

In Chekhov's dramas the basic principles for the short story, his way of portraying life and people, remain intact. In this way he overthrows long-standing principles customarily considered absolutely essential to a play and created a type of drama suited to his own particular genius.

Because Thomas Mann did not notice the artistic reasons for Chekhov's devotion to Tolstoy (he does not mention the novel at all), he did not see that by nature Chekhov the positivist, the man of action and decision, and Chekhov the artist were incompatible. Chekhov's attempt to unite the two sides of his nature, the personal, which admired Tolstoy's vitality, initiative, and moral authority and the artistic, which demanded of him impartiality, was thus doomed to fail.

⁹³Life and Letters, pp. 181-182. Th. Mann, probably in referring to this letter, says of Chekhov: "Er vertraue . . . , dass der Leser die in der Erzählung fehlenden, unterdrückten 'subjektiven,' das heisst: bekennenden Elemente, die sittliche Stellungnahme schon selbst ergänzen werde" (p.857).

As a positivist, Chekhov was, as Mann calls him, "ein schlichter, auf irgendwelche Lizenzen der Grösse keinen Augenblick Anspruch erhebender Diener der bessernden Wahrheit" (p.845). His truth lay within the boundaries of scientifically proven facts. His modesty, a result of his honesty, would not permit him to set up grandiose theories on truth to guide mankind to happiness, so he had to restrict himself to activity with the sphere of facts in order to help man. Chekhov's need for practical activity was so great because of the spiritual stagnation and emptiness he felt not only in himself, but also in the whole of society at that time. What was needed was action by men who did not doubt themselves, but were convinced that what they did was right. After the death of the famous traveler N. M. Przhevalsky, Chekhov wrote:

Such personalities are living documents demonstrating to society that in addition to the men and women who spend their lives discussing optimism and pessimism, writing mediocre stories to kill time, and drawing up unnecessary schemes and cheap dissertations . . . there are people of another sort, capable of heroic feats, possessing faith, and thoroughly conscious of their aim. If the positive types created by literature provide valuable educational material, those created by life itself are beyond price.⁹⁴

Thomas Mann was right in declaring that Chekhov felt that his literary activity are always "der Ergänzung bedürftig, durch männlich-praktische, soziale Tätigkeit in der Welt, unter den Menschen, im Leben" (p.846). The dissatisfaction with his own writing did play a role in Chekhov's decision to make the journey to the convict island of Sachalin, to continue throughout his life, although intermittently, his practice as a doctor, and to help in many other ways (building barracks for the sick in his fight against cholera, acting as curator of a country school, etc.). However, this only

⁹⁴Simmons, p. 170. The quotation is taken from an article by Chekhov published in Novoe vremia, October 26, 1888. I was able to find an English translation only in the book by Simmons.

further points out the basic disparity between the two fields of his activity.

Although the difference in outlook with respect to his practical and literary activity was a major cause of conflict within Chekhov, they cannot be radically separated since each had a certain influence on the other. Chekhov's belief in science, in the usefulness of practical, constructive action aroused in him this feeling of dissatisfaction towards his literary work. On the other hand, although Chekhov as a positivist disliked highflown theories which lacked a scientific foundation, the objective attitude his art required of him made Chekhov regard even his own positivism with scepticism. The ironic realization that neither science nor practical assistance can really help man solve his basic problems resulted in excessive modesty towards his own ceaseless efforts and achievement.

In spite of this scepticism Chekhov considered it his duty at least to strive to be of some concrete help to mankind. In fact, because he doubted that his literary work had any value or lasting meaning, he sometimes regarded his practical activity, his work as a doctor, as the real justification of his life. Mann also stresses this, referring to Chekhov's words: "Die Literatur war . . . seine Geliebte, die Wissenschaft aber, die Medizin, seine legitime Frau, bei der er sich in Schuld fühlte für die Untreue, die er mit jener an ihr verübte" (p.846).⁹⁵

⁹⁵This quotation by Th. Mann from Chekhov's letter to A. S. Souvorin, September 11, 1888, is not quite correct. Chekhov wrote: "Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I am bored with one I spend the night with the other. Though this is irregular, it is not monotonous, and besides, neither really loses through my infidelity. If I did not have my medical work I could hardly give my leisure and my spare thoughts to literature" (Life and Letters, p. 115). Although Chekhov regards his medical work as his "lawful wife" (in retort to Souvorin's advice to give up his medical career), this quotation expresses no feeling of guilt towards medicine because of the time he spends on his literary work.

Since Mann regards Chekhov's development from the point of view of the growing connection between the aesthetical and the ethical, one can visualize to some extent in what direction Th. Mann's interpretation of Chekhov must necessarily proceed if this unity is to be realized. The positivist side of Chekhov's nature must be brought into the foreground, a closer interrelation established between the positivist and the artist, life and art. Mann, therefore, stressed the positivistic reasons for Chekhov's ironic attitude towards Tolstoy and the fact that Chekhov sought relief from his dissatisfaction with his art in practical work. However, Chekhov's dissatisfaction could not be relieved in this way, because practical work could not dispel the basic doubt towards his art, the result of the paradox within his artistic nature. Practical work fulfilled basically only one part of his nature, Chekhov's desire to be actively useful to mankind.

Chekhov saw that for the most part the public did not understand his way of writing and was convinced that his works would not be read for long. Even critics could not appreciate his work because, he felt, none were really competent. Furthermore, he himself was plagued by continual doubts and questioned his existence as a writer, asking, as Mann writes, "mit schamhaftem Gewissen": "Führe ich nicht . . . den Leser hinters Licht, da ich ja doch die wichtigsten Fragen nicht zu beantworten weiss?" (p.846). This is what had interested and struck Th. Mann most in Chekhov, his deep scepticism, his doubts towards himself as a writer. These doubts, in Mann's

⁹⁶This sentence, as far as I was able to ascertain, is not to be found in this form among Chekhov's letters. Yet since it forms a leitmotiv in Th. Mann's essay on this subject, it will serve in this thesis as the core for the general discussion of Chekhov's scepticism. This quotation in relation to a letter which may have served Mann as a source for this statement, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III (see pp. 59-60).

opinion, extended beyond his own literary activity to the meaning and value of art itself.

Seine langandauernde Selbstbezweiflung als Künstler reicht wenn mir recht ist, über sein Selbst hinaus; sie erstreckt sich auf die Kunst, die Literatur überhaupt, mit der "in seinen vier Wänden" allein zu leben ihm widerstand" (p.846).⁹⁷

The above interpretation of Chekhov's scepticism finds its foundation in Mann's own thoughts on the nature of the artist's relation to his art, and the purpose of art itself. In analyzing first Th. Mann's basic ideas in this respect and how he applies them to Chekhov's problem I will then attempt to elucidate to what extent these ideas differ from or coincide with Chekhov's own view. On the basis of this investigation I hope to clarify the differences and similarities between their respective viewpoints with regard to the final problem, the nature of the justification for his artistic work which induced Chekhov to continue writing.

⁹⁷In this statement Th. Mann is most likely referring to a phrase from his quotation of Chekhov's opinion on Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata" (see p. 48, n. 87). This phrase "in meinen vier Wänden" does not appear, however, in this letter to Souvorin (December 17, 1890), where Chekhov's words are: "had I sat at home." It does appear in a letter to Souvorin, October 19, 1891. In this letter Chekhov states: "If I am a doctor, I need patients and a hospital; if I am a writer, I ought to live among the people. . . . I need, if only a scrap, social and political life, if only a tiny scrap--but this life within four walls, without nature, without people, without a country, without health and appetite--this is not life, but a sort of . . . and nothing more" (Life and Letters, p. 194). The quotation is evidence of a state of spiritual depression due to sickness and isolation, preventing him from doing justice to his work both as a writer and a doctor. Th. Mann's interpretation of this phrase as proof of Chekhov's doubts towards the meaning and value of art itself would be erroneous in relation to the latter quotation. If Mann, however, has in mind only the former quotation, referring to Chekhov's experiences on the convict island of Sachalin, this opinion would be justified to a certain extent, for Chekhov at this time felt that the literary works of his contemporaries (and particularly his own), failed to provide the spiritual guidance that was needed, that they were too insipid to be of any value for mankind. This pessimistic attitude towards literature was a major reason for his journey to Sachalin.

III ARTISTIC MATURITY

Scepticism and Pessimism

Chekhov's attitude towards life and art was marked by a deep aversion to any social or literary tendencies and concepts. This may be explained in part by Chekhov's conviction that such concepts are not adequate in giving a true picture of reality. He felt instinctively that an artist must be entirely free of any preconceived ideas in order to depict life objectively. In his search for new means of giving such an objective portrayal, Chekhov, rejecting former concepts and principles, simply followed the guidance of his intuition. In a letter to I. L. Scheglov he states:

. . . when people talk to me of the imaginative and the unimaginative, of what is dramatic and not dramatic, of tendencies, realism and the like, I get perplexed, irresolutely say yes or no, and answer with banal half-truths which are not worth a brass farthing. I divide all work into two kinds: that which I like and that which I do not like. I have no other criterion, and if you were to ask me why I like Shakespeare and not Zlatovratsky I should not be able to answer. Perhaps, some day, when I shall have grown wise, I may acquire a criterion (March 22, 1890).⁹⁸

Although Chekhov usually did substantiate his criticisms of other writers, he based them on his own personal preferences and never on a general criterion. Thus he denounced sentimentality, subjectivity, longwindedness, pathos, and moral philosophizing. Chekhov, nevertheless, felt that the lack of a basic criterion of judgment behind his criticisms and his own work, was a sign of decadence.

The failure to have definite convictions as to the purpose and meaning of his work, a general malaise among writers of the time, Chekhov considered to be almost a symptom of artistic impotence. He knew that for him such

⁹⁸Life and Letters, p. 179.

inner certainty was unattainable, since rationally he could not accept any standard as absolute. Yet basically he felt a deep need for it, as revealed in a letter to I. L. Scheglov:

If criticism to whose authority you refer, knows what you and I do not know, why has it been keeping silent? Why does it not reveal to us the truth and the immutable laws? If it knew, believe me it would long ago have shown us the way, and we would know what to do, and Eofanov [a Russian poet] would not be sitting in a lunatic asylum, Garshin would be alive, Baranzevich would not be sulking, and we should not be so dull and faint as we are now. . . . (March 22, 1890)⁹⁹

This lack of faith was the cause of Chekhov's scepticism towards himself and his literary work.

Mann in his essay "Versuch über Tschechow" frequently stresses the Russian writer's dissatisfaction with his own work, his feeling of artistic insignificance.

Dieser Kurzgeschichtenschreiber war zu lang überzeugt von der Geringfügigkeit seiner Fähigkeiten, von seiner künstlerischen Unwürde; sehr langsam und schwer gewann er einigen Glauben an sich--den Glauben, an dem es nicht fehlen darf, wenn andere an uns glauben sollen. . . . (p.844)

However, Mann maintains, if this feeling of insignificance predominates to such a degree that it determines the opinion the world forms of an author, then it acts as a deterrent to communication, the establishment of an ethical relation between the author and the rest of mankind. "Denn die Meinung, die wir von uns selbst hegen, ist nicht ohne Einfluss auf das Bild, das die Menschen sich von uns machen; sie färbt ab auf diese und verfälscht es unter Umständen" (p.844). Since Mann regards Chekhov's development in the light of a connection between the aesthetical and the ethical, he considers Chekhov's basic problem the struggle to surmount his doubts by finding some ethical guideline. Mann himself had to contend throughout his life with a deep-seated pessimism. A strong feeling of moral responsibility

⁹⁹Life and Letters, p. 179.

towards humanity, however, compelled him to place the emphasis on hope and faith.

Chekhov's "A Dreary Story" ("Eine langweilige Geschichte"), 1889, epitomized for Mann the central problem of Chekhov's life, and forms, therefore, the core of his interpretation of Chekhov's works. In the story an old and famous scientist, Nikolay Stepanovitch, sensing his approaching death, suddenly finds himself confronted with the realization that his life was basically meaningless since it lacked a unifying idea--a guiding principle. He states pessimistically:

Every feeling and every thought exists apart in me; and in all my criticisms of science, the theatre, literature, my pupils, and in all the pictures my imagination draws, even the most skilful analyst could not find what is called a general idea, or the god of a living man. And if there is not that, then there is nothing.¹⁰⁰

Unable to find this unifying idea Nikolay Stepanovitch succumbs to despair, grows apathetic and indifferent, and finally concludes that

When a man has not in him what is loftier and mightier than all external impressions, a bad cold is really enough to upset his equilibrium. . . . And all his pessimism or optimism with his thoughts, great and small have at such times significance as symptoms and nothing more.¹⁰¹

The old professor capitulates when confronted with the true nature of life.

In quoting these sections of the story, Mann draws a parallel between the professor's thoughts and Chekhov's own, indicating in this way what he considers to be the root of Chekhov's pessimism and scepticism. In Mann's opinion, furthermore, popularity and fame, instead of reassuring and instilling confidence in Chekhov, only aroused in him a feeling of embarrassment and suspicion. He says of Chekhov:

¹⁰⁰ Select Tales of Tchekhov, trans. Constance Garnett (London, 1961), p. 529. Mann also quotes this section (p.854).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 529-530. This section is also quoted by Mann (p.854).

Er hat seinem alten sterbenden Gelehrten viel von sich selbst mitgegeben, vor allem dieses "Ich liebe nun einmal die Popularität meines Namens nicht." Denn auch Tschechow liebte nicht seinen wachsenden Ruhm, es war ihm dabei "aus irgendeinem Grunde bange zumut." Betrog er nicht seine Leser, indem er sie mit seinem Talent blendete, "auf die wichtigsten Fragen aber nicht zu antworten wusste"? Wozu schrieb er? Welches war sein Ziel, sein Glaube, der "Gott des lebendigen Menschen"? Wo die "Gesamtidee" seines Lebens und Schreibens, "ohne die überhaupt nichts ist"? (p.855).

It may be added in parenthesis that the quotations and statements pertaining directly to Chekhov are most likely based upon Chekhov's letter to A. S. Souvorin, October 27, 1888, in which Chekhov writes:

It is all the same to me--whether I write "Birthday Parties" or "Fires," or a vaudeville, or a letter to an acquaintance--it is all boring, mechanical, dull, and I pity the critic who attaches importance, for instance, to "Fires." It seems to me that I deceive him with my work as I am deceiving many people either by my serious or excessively cheerful face. I am not pleased at being a success; the subjects which sit in my head are annoyed and jealous of those already written; it is a pity that the rubbish has been done, while the good material is still lying about. . . ."102

This quotation does seem to point to the idea inherent in Mann's statement that Chekhov felt he was deceiving the reader by the outward brilliance of his talent. Mann's quotation (see ch. III, p. 54 for the full quotation), however, contained also the conclusion that the reason for Chekhov's feeling of deceiving the reader is his inability to give final answers, to find some underlying, general ethical idea. A statement exactly to this effect I was unable to find among Chekhov's letters, yet perhaps Mann obtained this impression from an earlier section in the letter, where Chekhov writes:

In doing a story, one first of all, even involuntarily, gets busy on its framework: from a crowd of heroes and half-heroes, one takes only one character--the wife, or the husband--one puts that person against the background and draws only that character, emphasizing it; and the others are scattered about the background, like small coins, and the result is something like the canopy of heaven: one large moon and a mass of very tiny stars around it. The moon is not a success because

¹⁰²Life and Letters, p. 128.

it could be understood only if the stars are understood, but the stars are not worked out. And the result is not literature, but patchwork.¹⁰³

Although this term "patchwork" indicates the lack of a unifying element, it does not seem--in this particular letter--that Chekhov was seeking a guiding idea. Rather he longed for more time to "work out" the other characters of the story. Little time and the need for money prevented him from developing the good subjects he had in his mind. He writes: "What do I call good? Those images which seem to me the best, those I love and jealously guard lest I waste or mutilate them for some hurriedly written 'Birthday Parties.'" ¹⁰⁴ Thus Chekhov's scepticism in this particular instance was neither the result of the lack of an ethical guideline as Mann thought, nor entirely due to the feeling that his talent is insignificant, for although he considered everything he had written up to that time as "rubbish," his head was full of good ideas, themes, and characters. Chekhov at this time was simply frustrated because of the adverse circumstances under which he worked. However, the fact that Chekhov regarded such stories as "Birthday Parties" and "Fires" as "boring, mechanical, dull" is significant, since it seems to reflect his feeling of dissatisfaction even towards some of his best works, arising perhaps, as has been indicated, out of the knowledge that he can only depict life as it is.

Th. Mann vindicates his idea of the close affinity between the old scientist's and Chekhov's thoughts by quoting from one of Chekhov's letters: "Ein bewusstes Leben ohne eine bestimmte Weltanschauung . . . ist kein Leben,

¹⁰³Life and Letters, pp. 127-128.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 128.

sondern eine Last und ein Schrecken" (p.855).¹⁰⁵ Chekhov, however, had always countered any attempts by others to identify him with the characters of his stories. Thus in relation to "A Dreary Story" he asserts in a letter to A. S. Souvorin: "if I present you with the thoughts of the professor, believe me and don't look in them for Tchekhov's thoughts" (October 17, 1889).¹⁰⁶ The ideas themselves did not interest him, Chekhov explained, but only the role such ideas play in the lives of the people he is describing. He continues in the letter to Souvorin:

To me, as an author, all these opinions have no value at all. The point is not in their substance: that is changeable and not new. The whole essence is in the nature of those opinions, in their dependence upon external influences, etc. They should be examined, like objects, like symptoms, with perfect objectivity, without **trying** either to agree with them or dispute them. (October 17, 1889)¹⁰⁷

Even though the old professor's conclusion, that life is meaningless if it lacks an underlying purpose, seems to characterize Chekhov's own plight, it was not Chekhov's aim in his stories to propound an idea.

Helene Auzinger in her essay "Čechov und das Nicht-zu-Ende-sprechen" points to this as a possible source of misunderstanding of Chekhov's art. She writes, concerning Mann's interpretation of Chekhov's "A Dreary Story":

¹⁰⁵Whereas Mann quotes this sentence as a statement Chekhov made in relation to himself, it was rather a statement summarizing the idea that was to conclude a story Chekhov was writing at the time. Chekhov writes in a letter to A. S. Souvorin, November 28, 1888: "My story begins straight from chapter seven and ends with what has long been known--namely, that a thinking life without a definite outlook is not life, but a burden, a horror" (Life and Letters, p. 134). Chekhov's personal attitude towards such well-known ideas presented in his stories will be indicated.

¹⁰⁶Life and Letters, p. 169.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., pp. 169-170.

Th. Mann faszinierten die Gedanken und Worte des Helden, denen Čechov keinen grossen Wert beimisst und die er, im Gegensatz zu Th. Mann nicht ernst nimmt. Hier zeigt sich die Schwierigkeit des "Nicht-zu-Ende-gesprochenen," das jedem Leser die Möglichkeit freier Auslegung überlässt. Nicht immer stimmt diese mit den Absichten des Dichters überein, wie Čechovs briefliche Äusserungen über die "Langweilige Geschichte" beweisen. Thomas Mann kannte sie wahrscheinlich nicht, sonst hätte er sich wohl mit ihnen auseinandergesetzt.¹⁰⁸

Instead of expressing what he hopes to reveal to the reader directly, Chekhov rather lets it become apparent through the action of the story, the nature of the relations between people. Dmitri Chizhevsky in his essay "Chekhov in the Development of Russian Literature" specifies these two essential traits of Chekhov's writing:

. . . the renunciation of the formulation of thoughts, above all, the renunciation of such elements of "didactic" art as the use of aphorisms and maxims which are supposed to communicate to the reader the intent, the "tendency" of the work; in opposition to that, the creation of a "general mood" through which, if need be, certain "results" of the artistic presentation may be suggested to the feeling of the reader, to the capacity to feel, if not to the intellect.¹⁰⁹

Thus the suggestion underlying "A Dreary Story" is that Nikolay Stepanovitch basically lacked warmth and feeling for others. First the complete immersion of his life in science and then the total loss of any interest at all in life prevented him from having any genuine understanding or concern even for those dearest to him. Chekhov himself says in a letter to A. N. Plescheyev:

. . . besides, my hero--and this is one of his chief traits--views with complete unconcern the inner life of those around him, and while they are weeping, making mistakes, and lying, he calmly discusses the theatre or literature. If he were of a different cut, Lisa and Katya might not, perhaps, have come to nothing. (September 30, 1889)¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Helene Auzinger, "Čechov und das Nicht-zu-Ende-sprechen," Die Welt der Slaven, V (1960), p. 240.

¹⁰⁹ Dmitri Chizhevsky, "Chekhov in the Development of Russian Literature," Chekhov, A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1967), p. 54.

¹¹⁰ Life and Letters, p. 166.

Nikolay Stepanovitch is spiritually completely "emptyhanded." When Katya his ward, desperately in need of help, comes to him and asks: "Nikolay Stepanovitch, I cannot go on living like this! I cannot! For God's sake, tell me quickly, this minute, what I am to do! . . . Only one word, only one word! . . . What am I to do?", he can only answer: "Upon my word, Katya, I don't know. . . ." ¹¹¹

In interpreting Chekhov's scepticism towards his work Mann takes as his premise the old scientist's pessimistic conclusion that without an absolute ideal nothing is of value, "And if there is not that, then there is nothing." His feeling of helplessness before the question "What am I to do?" if there is nothing in man "what is loftier and mightier than all external impressions," also describes, according to Mann, Chekhov's state. For Mann this question represented the basic theme of Chekhov's stories.

Chekhov did not believe in any philosophy or ideology that transcends human life and its limitations. Nor could he accept the absolute ideals of religion. Despite the longing to have faith, he knew that he lacked the necessary capacity to believe.

Chekhov, however, retained a positive attitude towards life. Although life, since it ends in death, becomes absurd without some kind of religious faith, Chekhov, nevertheless, felt that man should accept life as it is and not, like the old scientist, negate it. Even though Chekhov had no religious beliefs, in his attitude towards life he retained much of the Christian spirit in a profound love for all mankind.

Chekhov's state of mind, therefore, reached only at times the pessimistic level which Mann attributes to him. But the significance of the question "What am I to do?" in Chekhov's life and art, and how he answered

¹¹¹ Select Tales of Tchechov, p. 531. Mann also quotes these words.

it, must also be considered.

Mann, in dealing with this problem, refers to a discussion in the story "My Life" ("Der Taugenichts"), 1896.¹¹² Here two opposing possibilities are evolved. On the one hand Misail Poloznev sets forth the idea that man's most important duty is to prevent the strong from subjugating the weak, to change the deplorable situation of a majority working for a minority. This, he says, can only be achieved if everyone is equally obligated to work physically for his bread. Although he himself belonged to the privileged, educated class, he deliberately turned away from it in order to carry out this idea. Dr. Blagovo, a visitor, however, retorts that if everyone, even the scientists, great thinkers, and scholars were to partake in this struggle for existence, the progress of mankind would stand in great danger. He feels that one should work for the vague ideals of progress, civilization, and culture. Only by working for this unknown goal which lies in the far distant future, does life become worth while. And so the discussion continues, each trying to persuade the other that his personal goal is the most beneficial to mankind.

After some time, however, it becomes apparent that Dr. Blagovo was expatiating so eloquently on the need to work for an unknown future just to pass the time while waiting for Misail's sister with whom he was in love. This personal motive behind his visit ironized the sincerity of his views and made the discussion a hollow and meaningless palaver. Th. Mann says:

¹¹²The German translation "Der Taugenichts" of the Russian title "Moja Žizn'" ("My Life") carries a negative moral overtone which the original does not have. In the former case the author himself purposely inclines the reader in a certain direction, whereas Chekhov's own title shows complete impartiality on the author's part.

". . . die Dialektik des Besuchers ironisiert sich selbst dadurch, dass sie dem Warten auf das Mädchen dient" (p.857). Mann, moreover, felt that even Misail's earnest endeavor to put his thoughts into effect "wird entwertet oder doch problematisiert durch die schmutzigen Enttäuschungen, die er dabei erfährt, und die Schuld, die er damit auf sich lädt. . . ." (p.857). In following his ideal he becomes guilty towards life since his persistence is the cause of much suffering. Reality, life as it really is, "die Lebenswahrheit" (p.858), Mann infers, devaluates the ideals of man, his hopes and desires. It does not permit the existence of any underlying, guiding idea, in fact it destroys any such idea. Thus even in such stories as "My Life" where ideals are put forth, Mann continues to adhere to the conclusion he had drawn from "A Dreary Story," that Chekhov negates any ultimate purpose or goal in life.

The resulting ironical attitude towards man's ideals can create the impression, Mann maintains, that the writer himself is without any beliefs, that he is morally indifferent. Mann mentions that Chekhov, however, always rejected this reproach since he felt, according to Mann, "dass der Leser die in der Erzählung fehlenden, unterdrückten, 'subjektiven,' das heisst: bekennenden Elemente, die sittliche Stellungnahme schon selbst ergänzen werde" (p.857, see also ch. II, p. 50, n. 92). If, however, the reader does supplement the suppressed ethical standpoint, Mann wonders, "Woher dann aber seine 'Bangigkeit,' die Abneigung gegen seinen Ruhm, dieses Gefühl, seine Leser talentvoll hinters Licht zu führen, da er auf die wichtigsten Fragen doch die Antwort nicht wisse?" (p.858, see also ch. III, pp. 59-60).

This apparent paradox is of significance for Mann, because it convinces him that Chekhov's attitude towards life and art is fundamentally nihilistic.

Without a focal point, a central idea that unifies and gives a frame of reference to all other thoughts, a writer can only make man aware of his problems and the ethical purport of individual situations, but cannot aid him in overcoming difficulties. If this is the case, then his work becomes meaningless. Mann quotes Chekhov as saying:

Wie die Dinge liegen, hat das Leben eines Künstlers keinen Sinn, und je begabter er ist, desto seltsamer und unbegreiflicher wird seine Rolle, weil es erwiesen ist, dass er zur Belustigung eines unsauberen Raubtiers arbeitet und die bestehende Ordnung damit unterstützt (p.858).¹¹³

Here Mann draws a parallel between Chekhov and himself and all those who are plagued by similar doubts as to the value of their work.

Aber sein Gram, seine Zweifel am Sinn seiner Arbeit, sein Gefühl für die Seltsamkeit und Unbegreiflichkeit seiner Rolle als Künstler sind zeitlos und nicht gebunden an die russischen Zustände von damals. "Zustände," will sagen: schlimme, eine heillose Kluft zwischen Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit aufweisende Zustände gibt es immer, und auch heute hat Tschechow Brüder im Leide, denen nicht wohl ist bei ihrem Ruhm . . . , die sich so gut wie er in den greisen Helden der "Langweiligen Geschichte" versetzen können, die den Sinn ihrer Arbeit nicht zu nennen vermögen--und die dennoch arbeiten, arbeiten bis ans Ende (p.859).

It is mainly with regard to these two aspects that Mann interprets Chekhov's life and works: a nihilism, due to the discrepancy existing between "Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit" and the lack of a unifying principle; and a positive

¹¹³Mann mentions that "die bestehende Ordnung," the conditions Chekhov has in mind, are those in Russia during the 1890's. As far as I have been able to ascertain this quotation is not to be found among his letters during this time. However, the general ideas expressed in this quotation exist, although with a somewhat different meaning and context, in Chekhov's letter to Souvorin, November 25, 1892, from which Mann had already quoted the sentence "Wir zeichnen nur das Leben wie es ist . . . und weiter tun wir keinen Schritt." Chekhov's general ideas in this letter can be summarized by his sentences: "We have neither immediate nor remote aims, and in our souls--a great emptiness. . . . Whether it is disease or not--the name doesn't matter; but it must be owned our situation is worse than bad. I do not know what we shall become in ten or twenty years--perhaps the circumstances will have changed by that time--but for the time being it would be rash to expect of us anything really good, apart from whether we have talent or not" (Life and Letters, p. 211).

striving to overcome it, to find something of value and meaning. It embodies the fundamental struggle of Th. Mann's own life.

Thomas Mann's nihilistic philosophy was not entirely the result of a purely personal experience of life. He himself maintained that the fate of each individual is closely connected to and deeply influenced by the general atmosphere of the time. This idea is expressed for example in The Magic Mountain: "Der Mensch lebt nicht nur sein persönliches Leben als Einzelwesen, sondern, bewusst oder unbewusst, auch das seiner Epoche und Zeitgenossenschaft."¹¹⁴ Th. Mann, therefore, describes not without reason the terrible social conditions, the intellectual atmosphere in Russia during Chekhov's lifetime. Chekhov's dilemma was typical, not only of his own time, but of any period that bears in it the seed of a nihilistic outlook on life. Again in The Magic Mountain Mann briefly and concisely describes one of the basic characteristics of such a time:

Dem einzelnen Menschen mögen mancherlei persönliche Ziele, Zwecke, Hoffnungen, Aussichten vor Augen schweben, aus denen er den Impuls zu hoher Anstrengung und Tätigkeit schöpft; wenn das Unpersönliche um ihn her, die Zeit selbst der Hoffnungen und Aussichten bei aller äusseren Regsamkeit im Grunde entbehrt, wenn sie sich ihm als hoffnungslos, aussichtslos und ratlos heimlich zu erkennen gibt und der bewusst oder unbewusst gestellten, aber doch irgendwie gestellten Frage nach einem letzten, mehr als persönlichen, unbedingten Sinn aller Anstrengung und Tätigkeit ein hohles Schweigen entgegensetzt, so wird gerade in Fällen redlicheren Menschentums eine gewisse lähmende Wirkung solchen Sachverhalts fast unausbleiblich sein, die sich auf dem Wege über das Seelisch-Sittliche geradezu auf das physische und organische Teil des Individuums erstrecken mag.¹¹⁵

Mann regards the absence of an ethical guideline, of an answer to the question concerning the absolute meaning of all human activity, not simply as a personal problem but as a symptom of a time of decadence.

¹¹⁴Thomas Mann, Zauberberg, p. 38.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

The time in which Chekhov lived, especially the 1880's and the 1890's, was "hoffnungslos, aussichtslos und ratlos." For Mann Chekhov's story "Ward No. 6" ("Krankenstation Nr. 6"), 1892, symbolizes the hopeless state of conditions existing in Russia. The story relates how a doctor in a mental hospital became interested in the thoughts and problems of one of the inmates, "aus Überdruß an einer dummen und miserablen Welt der Normalität" (p.853). The world, consequently, declared him to be insane and locked him up too. Th. Mann writes: "Die Novelle ist, obgleich sie jede direkte Anklage vermeidet, so grauenhaft symbolisch für die korrupte Hoffnungslosigkeit der Zustände im Russland von damals, die Entwürdigung des Menschen in der Spätzeit der Selbstherrschaft. . . ." (p.853). An atmosphere of spiritual stagnation, emptiness and helplessness is characteristic of a "Spätzeit," of an epoch coming to a close, a way of life that is nearing its end. Old ideas, traditions and ideals lose their former meaning and value, yet the strength and force of new ideas, that could bring about a break with the old and initiate a new time, is lacking.

Both Mann and Chekhov experienced the end of an epoch. Bernhard Blume in his book Thomas Mann und Goethe states that for Mann it was "die bürgerliche Epoche. . . . Im Mittelpunkt dieser Zeit steht für ihn der aus der Geborgenheit und Gebundenheit des christlich autoritären Mittelalters sich befreiende Mensch, der zweifelnde, fragende, kritische und unabhängige Einzelne."¹¹⁶ Chekhov represented for Mann such an individual, who in his desire for freedom, grows critical, wary, and doubtful of traditional ideals. Mann writes:

¹¹⁶Bernhard Blume, Thomas Mann und Goethe (Bern, 1949), p. 32.

Aber unser Geschichtenerzähler bekundet einen auffallenden Scharfblick für die Fragwürdigkeit des Fortschritts im Humanen und der sozial-moralischen Verhältnisse nach der Bauernbefreiung in seinem heimatlichen Russland--Verhältnisse, denen indessen eine gewisse Allgemeingültigkeit zukommt. (p.860)

This perspicacity, or "Scharfblick," is nothing else than the capacity for "Erkenntnis." It reveals to mankind the true nature of life, which, according to Mann, will always be in conflict with his ideals.

Nihilism and Aestheticism

Thomas Mann was of the opinion that the development of man's critical consciousness, his striving for complete personal freedom will lead ultimately towards a nihilistic view of life. Bernhard Blume describes this process as follows:

Dieser Prozess der Befreiung ist, historisch gesehen, ein allmählicher; er verwirklicht Schritt für Schritt das Grundrecht des Menschen auf Selbstbestimmung; er bringt dem Einzelnen religiöse, sittliche, politische Autonomie; aber eine sonderbare Paradoxie will es, dass am Ende dieser Epoche, die mit so grossem Aufschwung begonnen hatte, der nun völlig befreite Mensch ratlos vor dem Nichts steht.¹¹⁷

In this respect particularly the ideas of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were very influential on Mann.

Nietzsche had proclaimed that nihilism is the inevitable outcome of the loss of religious faith and an emphasis solely upon human reason. All absolute standards, consequently, become relative, are deprived of absolute value. Once man recognizes that rationally he will find no final answer to the meaning of life, life, according to Nietzsche, becomes meaningless. Bernhard Blume writes that Nietzsche, among others, regarded "die Entwicklung der modernen Geistesgeschichte als eine immanente Dialektik der Selbst-Entfaltung und Selbst-Verneinung eben der Prinzipien, die sie begründet

¹¹⁷Blume, p. 32.

haben."¹¹⁸

Mann's thoughts on nihilism were similar to Nietzsche's as Herbert Lehnert (in his book Thomas Mann--Fiktion, Mythos, Religion) makes apparent: "Wenn Erkenntnis ohne eine Ordnung durch primäre Orientierungen nur perspektivisch sein kann, dann gibt es keine primäre oder absolute Erkenntnis; deren Abwesenheit zu bedauern, ist dann sinnlos."¹¹⁹

Schopenhauer, in contrast to Nietzsche and Mann, renounces life once he feels he has recognized its true nature. Erich Heller in his book Thomas Mann: Der ironische Deutsche explains that since the world, according to Schopenhauer, is nothing else "in ihrem Wesenskern . . . als der Wille zu sich selbst, ein sinnlos wollender Wille,"¹²⁰ man, in order to be free, must negate this irrational, uncontrolled force--the force governing life. Schopenhauer was convinced that man is capable of this; Erich Heller continues,

Denn der Geist kann gegen den Willen wollen und schliesslich in einem Akt heroischer Selbsterfüllung die Welt, die der Wille ist, verlassen und sich dort ansiedeln, wo kein Wille ist, also keine Welt, also--das Nichts.¹²¹

Schopenhauer, however, regards paradoxically "dieses Nichts . . . als die Fülle des Lebens und Geistes."¹²² On this pessimistic, nihilistic basis Schopenhauer builds his whole idea of a positive, aesthetical art, which always had an attraction for Th. Mann. "Man darf annehmen," Herbert Lehner concludes, "dass Schopenhauers Rechtfertigung der Kunst im Gegensatz zu der

¹¹⁸Blume, p. 34.

¹¹⁹Herbert Lehnert, Thomas Mann--Fiktion, Mythos, Religion (Stuttgart, 1965), p. 30.

¹²⁰Erich Heller, Thomas Mann: Der ironische Deutsche (Frankfurt/M., 1959), p. 9.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 10.

¹²²Ibid.

allgemeinen Nichtigkeit des dem Willen unterworfenen Lebens den jungen Thomas Mann beeindruckt hat."¹²³

Schopenhauers neo-platonism, the idea that all things on earth only serve to recall before the mind's eye, as Erich Heller says, "[die] ewigen Formen alles Vergängliche, das wahre Objekt der Kunst . . . [die] ursprünglichen und immerwährenden Vorbilder des sich in den Dingen der Welt objektivierenden Willens"¹²⁴ results in an adoration and worship of these visions. The artist, fascinated by the contemplation of these eternal forms, gradually withdraws from life. Only after he has freed himself from the will and has become pure "Erkenntnis" can he enter into and merge with this higher reality. In this way death, non-being, becomes paradoxically the highest fulfilment of all being.

This means, however, that the artist's capacity for "Erkenntnis" can no longer be directed towards the truth of this reality,

denn die Erkenntnis dessen [Erich Heller says], was nach seiner Lehre in Wahrheit ist, ergäbe ja nur eine traurige Geschichte. Nein, nicht die Wahrheit der Welt, dieser widerwärtigen Willenswelt, ist's, was Schopenhauers Heilige und Künstler anbetend und verehrend anschauen; sondern was sie zu ihrem Hosianna verlockt, ist die Metamorphose der Wirklichkeit, aufs wunderbarste bewirkt von der schöpferischen Phantasie-- ist also zuletzt die schöpferische Phantasie selber.¹²⁵

Once the artist has only his imagination as a guide, his art becomes purely aesthetical. He must now conceive his own guidelines and set up his own artistic structure, creating in this manner an ideal, although fictitious world of pure form. Herbert Lehnert describes this process as "Schauspiel im leeren Raum, mit anderen Worten: ästhetische Konstellationen auf dem

¹²³Lehnert, p. 38.

¹²⁴Heller, p. 39.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 40.

Hintergrund eines nihilistischen Bewusstseins oder in einem Begriff: dynamische Metaphysik."¹²⁶

It is only natural that Schopenhauer's "Konzeption des ästhetischen Aussenseiters"¹²⁷ would appeal to Mann, since his desire for freedom, for objectivity, for truth, resulted in a nihilism, which formed the core of Schopenhauer's aestheticism. This meant an alienation from life and, consequently, an admiration for "Geist," form, the creative phantasy per se.

However, Schopenhauer's idea of salvation and personal fulfilment in the complete freedom of art, was regarded by both Nietzsche and Mann as a beautiful illusion, a wonderful lie to help man forget the reality of a meaningless existence.

Since Mann aimed at all times at depicting reality, he could never go as far as Schopenhauer in his renunciation of life. As Herbert Lehnert says: "Die Verneinung des Willens zum Leben in freiwilliger Askese, den ethischen Zielpunkt der Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, liess Thomas Mann beiseite." He regarded, furthermore, Schopenhauer's idea of salvation as the creation of a new absolute ethic, as "Schopenhauers primäre Orientierung oder mindestens der Ersatz davon."¹²⁸

Mann remained basically a nihilist for whom no absolute, ultimate answer existed. Thus he could find no consolation in Schopenhauer's ethic, which had its guideline in a metaphysical aestheticism--the answer to the question, "what should one do?" For this reason he also could not accept Nietzsche's "Ersatz," his "Welt-als-Wille-zur-Macht, bejaht in der übermenschlichen Hinnahme einer Wirklichkeit, die keiner moralischen Rechtfertigung

¹²⁶Lehnert, p. 34.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 38.

¹²⁸Ibid.

bedarf und unermesslich erhaben ist über das leidende Verlangen nach Sinn und Bedeutung."¹²⁹

Although Mann always felt irresistibly drawn away from life through his "Geist," an inextinguishable love and yearning for life always drew him back again. It was the cause of his critical attitude towards Schopenhauer's type of aestheticism, which in its final sense bore in it a romantic yearning for death.

In Thomas Mann's early novel Buddenbrooks Thomas Buddenbrook, sensing his approaching death, found for a short time consolation in the vision of a timeless reality which Schopenhauer revealed to him. It was a sign of his growing alienation and indifference to life. Another danger inherent in such a detachment from life, besides an increasing inability to cope with it, can be seen in the case of Aschenbach in "Der Tod in Venedig." Aschenbach is fascinated by the vision of ideal beauty which the boy Tadzio awakens in him. The love and admiration he feels for this ideal becomes focused on the boy himself.

Standbild und Spiegel! Seine Augen umfassten die edle Gestalt dort am Rande des Blauen, und in aufschwärmendem Entzücken glaubte er mit diesem Blick das Schöne selbst zu begreifen, die Form als Gottesgedanken, die eine und reine Vollkommenheit, die im Geiste lebt und von der ein menschliches Abbild und Gleichnis hier leicht und hold zur Anbetung aufgerichtet war.¹³⁰

Aschenbach misunderstands the real nature of life by transfusing it with his ideal. The adoration and worship of an ideal, if it becomes directed towards life, perverts life of necessity. Mann was always fascinated by the idea of pure form, but he saw its dangers. Art, if it became only "Geist," simply form, beauty, would distort life instead of recreating it.

¹²⁹Heller, p. 42.

¹³⁰Thomas Mann, "Der Tod in Venedig," Gesammelte Werke, F.V., VIII, p. 490.

According to Mann, art is not possible at either extreme of "Geist" or "Leben," but only in the state of tension between these opposing forces. Art must incorporate both "Geist" and "Leben," truth and reality. The impossibility of harmonizing, unifying the two extremes is the root of the artist's dilemma and suffering. Already Tonio Kröger (in the Novelle by the same name) had felt the depth of this paradox:

Es ist nötig, dass man irgend etwas Aussermenschliches und Unmenschliches sei, dass man zum Menschlichen in einem seltsam fernen und unteiligten Verhältnis stehe, um imstande und überhaupt versucht zu sein, es zu spielen, damit zu spielen, es wirksam und geschmackvoll darzustellen. Die Begabung für Stil, Form und Ausdruck setzt bereits dieses kühle und wählerische Verhältnis zum Menschlichen, ja, eine gewisse menschliche Verarmung und Verödung voraus. Denn das gesunde und starke Gefühl, dabei bleibt es, hat keinen Geschmack. Es ist aus mit dem Künstler, sobald er Mensch wird und zu empfinden beginnt.¹³¹

The artist must remain separated from the rest of the world and other people in order to produce art: ". . . der Abgrund von Ironie, Unglaube, Opposition, Erkenntnis, Gefühl, der Sie von den Menschen trennt, klafft tiefer und tiefer, Sie sind einsam, und fortan gibt es keine Verständigung mehr."¹³² Yet the result of this extreme separation between life and art can only be an aesthetical, nihilistic art, which instead of recreating life, destroys it, puts an end to it. "Was ausgesprochen ist, so lautet sein [the artist's] Glaubensbekenntnis, ist erledigt. Ist die ganze Welt ausgesprochen, so ist sie erledigt, erlöst, abgetan. . . ."¹³³ Art in this way defeats its own purpose, which, according to Mann, must always be a communication with life.

Most of Mann's works deal in some way or another with the failure or success, or the struggle to find a synthesis between "Geist" and "Leben,"

¹³¹Thomas Mann, "Tonio Kröger," Gesammelte Werke, S.V., VIII, p. 295.

¹³²Ibid., p. 297.

¹³³Ibid., p. 302.

"das Leben, wie es als ewiger Gegensatz dem Geiste und der Kunst gegenübersteht . . . ,"¹³⁴ between the aesthetical and the ethical.

In Mann's early novel Buddenbrooks art is represented as a force detrimental to life. It undermines the principles of an ethic upon which a whole culture is founded and draws man into a sphere that is beyond human understanding, where former concepts become invalid, irrelevant. Paul Altenberg in his book Die Romane Thomas Manns writes:

Diese nunmehr fallende Welt hatte in dem "Sinn für Lebenspflichten" ihre erhaltende Ethik erkannt, überzeugt von der Moralität der "Lebensbürgerlichkeit." In der Kunst argwöhnt sie einen "Dispens vom Menschlichen," die Verführung zum Unanständigen, zur Lebensliederlichkeit und zuletzt eine Versuchung zum Tode.¹³⁵

Thomas Buddenbrooks' opposition "gegen das Neue, das Unheimliche und schon deswegen Unmoralische, also auch Partei gegen die Kunst und--in einem gewissen Sinne--also auch gegen den Geist, gegen die reine Aktivität des Geistes in der Kunst,"¹³⁶ is not altogether successful. In him the seeds of a new consciousness have already taken root, which gradually weaken his position in life. "Es wird abgewährt, aber es bleibt immer da, als böses Gewissen, als geheimer Zug ins Ferne, ins weniger Klare, ins weniger Sichere und nicht mehr Plausible."¹³⁷

In this early work, as Paul Altenberg indicates, music is an irrational force which lifts man out of his accustomed, secure, rational world.

Hier schon ist die Musik das fern her Kommende, immer Fremde, Urtümliche, die sonst von historischen Geräuschen übertönte Urmelodie unseres Daseins. Sie hebt das Gesellschaftliche auf, sie vereinsamt und führt den Menschen in die elementaren und zeitlosen Verhältnisse seiner

¹³⁴Thomas Mann, "Tonio Kröger," F.V., VIII, p. 302.

¹³⁵Paul Altenberg, Die Romane Thomas Manns (Bad Homburg vor der Höhe, 1961), p. 21.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 22.

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 20

Existenz zurück.¹³⁸

Mann felt that man can experience through music the essence of existence, of being per se. Music removes the false, artificial boundaries of a harmonious, circumscribed, understandable world so that man comes in contact "[mit] der Lebensunmittelbarkeit, der unsagbaren und undenkbaren Wirklichkeit."¹³⁹

Music plays a dual role in Mann's work. Not only does it bring man close to the essence of his existence and its fulfilment, but it also reveals itself as a destructive force, a force of alienation from life. The danger inherent in music had already been portrayed by Mann in his "Tristan." However, the highest and profoundest expression of the problematic, ironic nature of music is to be found only in Mann's Doktor Faustus. In this work music is no longer an irrational force, but an expression of the most penetrating rationality. Reality reveals itself in this music no longer as harmonious, but as a discordant chaos. Before this chaos everything seems to end.

The intellectual tendency of the time, under the influence of Schopenhauer, stressed the senselessness of a reality deprived of order, and sought refuge in the realm of pure form. Erich Heller declares:

Auf den Gipfeln der Epoche geht es anders zu: dort erweist sich Geist und Können gewöhnlich in der ästhetisch feinsinnigen Zubereitung des Chaos, im Pyrrhussieg der reinen Formen über allem Ordnungssin trotzenden Gehalte.¹⁴⁰

If art is, however, sompletely divorced from life, and form is separated from any content, the result can only be, in the last analysis, a complete

¹³⁸Altenberg, p. 21.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Heller, p. 19.

destruction of life. Erich Heller says:

Was Thomas Mann so gern und so naiv seine "Bürgerlichkeit" nannte, seine treue Anhänglichkeit an eine Daseinsform, die dem ungebundenen Treiben der Phantasie und dem Abenteuerertum der Kunst abhold war, das war nur seine Art des sittlichen Protests gegen eine Leidenschaft, die sich paradoxerweise an der Sinnlosigkeit der menschlichen Realität entzündete.¹⁴¹

The attempt at complete unification of life and art, portrayed in Mann's novel Doktor Faustus, ironically enough, also ends in destruction. The composer Adrian Leverkühn, following Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's ideas, had recognized, as Paul Altenberg says, that "In der Freiheit vom Sein liegt die Hoffnung, frei zu sein für das Sein, einen neuen Weg zur Existenz, also zu sich selbst zu finden."¹⁴²

In his search for the true nature of existence, Leverkühn, however, did not create for himself a higher reality of eternal forms of beauty and harmony. Truth for him was not an abstract, fictitious ideal: it had to be experienced with every fibre of the body and the mind. Truth and reality had to become identical, if art, music, was to become the purest, directest expression of life, "die Tatkraft an sich, die Tatkraft selbst, aber nicht als Idee, sondern in ihrer Wirklichkeit."¹⁴³ Paul Altenberg, referring to Doktor Faustus, further comments upon this identity between life and art:

Die auch diesen Roman durchklingende Frage: Was ist der Mensch? erfährt jedenfalls die Antwort, dass er, wie die Welt, in der er lebt, mehr ist als sein überliefertes bürgerliches Hochbild, dass er im Ganzen, Grenzenlosen und Sinnfremden seinen noch nicht gefundenen Ort hat.

In diesem Sinne boten sich Schicksal und Wesen der neuen Musik nicht als "Beispiel" an, es ist vielmehr der Vorgang am Menschlichen selbst, das Transzendieren aus säkularen Formen und Gewohnheiten in weniger enge und heimliche Strukturen, in ein neues Offensein, in eine Verfassung der Menschen, die den Ansprüchen des wieder unheimlich

¹⁴¹Heller, p. 16.

¹⁴²Altenberg, p. 300.

¹⁴³Thomas Mann, Doktor Faustus, Gesammelte Werke, F.V., VI, p. 108.

gewordenen Alls standhält, in der Begegnung mit dem wieder heilig und schrecklich "unmenschlichen" Universum.¹⁴⁴

In Doktor Faustus Mann's idea of the ironic nature of man's existence becomes apparent. The truth of reality--man as part of a limitless, chaotic, inhuman universe--is humanly unbearable, according to Mann. If man attempts to live according to the truth, he must destroy in himself every vestige of human feeling. In Adrian Leverkühn the loss of all humanity resulted in insanity.

This is the fundamental idea underlying the question Mann poses in his essay on Chekhov: "Ist die Lebenswahrheit von Natur ironisch, so ist wohl die Kunst nihilistisch von Natur?" (p.858). The truth of life, life's intrinsic senselessness, ironizes all man's endeavors to give it meaning, some ultimate purpose. "Die Lebenswahrheit," Mann continues, "auf die der Dichter vor allem verpflichtet ist, entwertet die Ideen und Meinungen. Sie ist von Natur ironisch . . ." (p.857).

Although the striving for truth devaluates ideals and destroys the illusion that life has any meaning, concomitant with this negative process, according to Mann, is a positive one--the process of creation, the work of art itself, "die Tatkraft an sich." However, the attainment of the highest truth, the perfect work of art, brings with it, as Leverkühn has shown, the most complete destruction.

Mann, therefore, in order to overcome this nihilism strove to place the emphasis not on the attainment of truth, which is impossible in life, but on the striving towards truth. Not only does this process gradually free man from bonds that have become meaningless, but the energies released

¹⁴⁴Altenberg, p. 311.

in this way, if they are directed towards life, can help to shape man's life more in accordance with his wishes. This is an idea expressed previously in Goethe's Faust.

Humanitas

The emphasis on the positive aspect of a basically nihilistic philosophy of life, on man's creative powers, formed the core of Mann's ethical standpoint in relation to life and art. With regard to Mann's ethical development Goethe's ideas were particularly influential. Bernhard Blume illustrates to what extent:

Auf die Entfaltung, die Entwicklung, die Bildung menschlicher Kräfte kommt alles an, und die kann niemals verwirklicht werden durch ein blosses Wissen, einen blossen Seinszustand, sondern nur durch dauern- des Streben, durch aktive Leistung, durch sinnvolles Tun. Goethe wird so zum grossartigen Vorbild für menschliches Verhalten, das weder in der Sicherheit ewiger Heilsgewissheit kampflos ruht, noch sich wider- standslos der chaotischen Sinnlosigkeit einer unbewältigten Existenz überlässt, sondern das sich freikämpft aus Zweifel und Unsicherheit zur Bemeisterung des Lebens.¹⁴⁵

Mann discovered also in Chekhov this need and desire to change life, to develop and unfold the potential energies in man: "Der Satz, zu dem sich, je länger er lebte und schrieb, sein Denken zusammenzog, war der: 'Die Hauptsache ist, das Leben umzugestalten; alles übrige ist unnütz'" (p.862).¹⁴⁶ This idea is of course a fundamental concept of Karl Marx. However, in spite of the fact that Chekhov was asked in 1889, "to contribute to Nachalo, the organ of the legal Marxists," as E. J. Simmons says, and had been pronounced by Mariya Vodovozova, head of the literary division of Nachalo,

¹⁴⁵Blume, p. 36.

¹⁴⁶This quotation, it seems, is taken from Chekhov's last story "The Bride" ("Die Braut"), 1903, in which ironically Sasha, the eternal student and dreamer, says: "The great thing is to turn your life upside down, nothing else matters" (A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, p. 376).

"a real Marxist" who is just "unable to recognize the fact" Chekhov's personal attitude, Simmons maintains "would have discouraged the Marxists." Simmons states that Chekhov disliked "the insincerity and misdirection of organized efforts on the part of the educated to bring about social and political change."¹⁴⁷ Chekhov, as he himself writes in a letter to Ivan Orlov, believed in individuals:

I believe in individual men; I see salvation in separate individualities scattered here and there all over Russia--whether they be intellectuals or peasants; with them lies the power, although they are few. (February 22, 1899)¹⁴⁸

Chekhov, in his personal life, did believe in the power of individuals to bring about some change in life through work. However, in his art such ideas usually appear in an ironical light.

Thomas Mann stresses the importance of work in Chekhov's life, because it epitomized for him Chekhov's struggle against nihilism. Since Mann, however, considers the statement in Chekhov's story on the need to change life as a direct reflection of Chekhov's own opinion, he saw in it a desire on Chekhov's part to give some ethical meaning, not only to his life, but also to his art. Work in this way becomes identical to Goethe's "Bildung" and Mann's "Tatkraft an sich." It is the creative power in man, the force which brings about the development and elevation of life. Art too, Mann says, cannot be completely nihilistic: "Sie ist ja sozusagen die Arbeit in Reinkultur und hoher Abstraktheit, das Paradigma aller Arbeit, die Arbeit selbst und an sich" (p.858). Since art is the highest essence and form of work, art is not only aesthetical, but also ethical. Chekhov's emphasis on work confirmed for Mann the idea that Chekhov, like himself, found the justification of his life and art in the connection between the aesthetical

¹⁴⁷Simmons, p. 467.

¹⁴⁸Life and Letters, p. 265.

and ethical.

Ist es nicht dieser Zusammenhang [des Ästhetischen und des Ethischen], welcher der Arbeitsamkeit der Kunst ihre Würde, ihren Sinn, ihre Dienlichkeit verleiht und woraus sich auch Tschschows ungemeine Schätzung der Arbeit überhaupt, seine Verurteilung alles nichtarbeitenden Drohnen- und Schmarotzertums erklärt, seine immer klarere Verwerfung eines Lebens, das, wie er sagte, "auf Sklaverei aufgebaut ist." (p.860)

Work meant for Mann the struggle to overcome the antithesis between "Geist" and "Leben," the attempt to unify the two opposing forces in man's nature. Mann writes in the essay "Goethe und Tolstoi" (1925):

Worauf es ankommt, ist aber, dass nichts zu leicht falle. Mühelose Natur, das ist Roheit. Müheloser Geist ist Wurzel- und Wesenlosigkeit. Eine hohe Begegnung von Geist und Natur auf ihrem sehnsuchtsvollen Weg zueinander: Das ist der Mensch.¹⁴⁹

This striving for unification, Mann continues:

. . . das Streben der Geistessöhne zur Natur, der Naturkinder zum Geist, deutet auf eine höhere Einheit als Ziel der Menschheit, welches sie, die in Wahrheit alles Strebens höchste Trägerin ist, mit ihrem eigenen Namen, mit dem der humanitas belegt.¹⁵⁰

However, since the antithesis between "Geist" and "Leben" cannot be resolved, Mann's idea of a higher unity would have to embrace this paradox. Goethe's nature, which tended towards a nihilistic view of life while retaining an irrational love for life, came to represent for Mann the principle of "humanitas." It is a concept of totality based on the Goethean idea of polarity, which maintains, in the word of Bernhard Blume, that the nature of any object can only be grasped "durch die Nennung der Extreme, zwischen denen sie sich befinden oder bewegen. . . ." ¹⁵¹ In summarizing the nature of Goethe's influence on Mann, Bernhard Blume writes:

¹⁴⁹Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," F.V., IX, p. 138.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁵¹Blume, p. 57.

Diese zwei Gedanken, der Gedanke der Totalität, der Ganzheit, und der Weg zu ihr, die beständige Selbstdisziplinierung, das Ich als Aufgabe gesehen, sind die zwei grossen Leitideen von Thomas Manns Goethebild.¹⁵²

Goethe strengthened Thomas Mann's conviction that the artist, out of a feeling of responsibility towards mankind, has a moral duty to develop his own personality to the highest possible extent. Mann asks, in the essay "Goethe und Tolstoi": "Ist denn Selbstliebe von der Liebe zu den Menschen überhaupt zu trennen?"¹⁵³ In his novel The Magic Mountain Mann depicts how Hans Castorp learned to seek and find this road to life. "Zum Leben," Castorp says, "gibt es zwei Wege: Der eine ist der gewöhnliche, direkte und brave. Der andere ist schlimm, er führt über den Tod, und das ist der geniale Weg." Death, according to Mann, "ist das geniale Prinzip, denn die Liebe zu ihm führt zur Liebe des Lebens und des Menschen."¹⁵⁴

However, this irrational love for man, arising out of a deep nihilism is not easily acquired. The greatest danger is "Der grosse Stumpfsinn," as a chapter in The Magic Mountain is called. Hans Castorp recognized in this "Stumpfsinn" "durchaus Unheimliches, Böses, und er wusste, was er sah: Das Leben ohne Zeit, das sorg- und hoffnungslose Leben, das Leben als stagnierend betriebsame Liederlichkeit, das tote Leben."¹⁵⁵ The old scientist of Chekhov's "A Dreary Story" almost paraphrases these words in describing his own state: "And all his pessimism or optimism with his thoughts great and small have at such times significance as symptoms and nothing more."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵²Blume, p. 56.

¹⁵³Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," F.V., IX, p. 71.

¹⁵⁴Thomas Mann, Zauberberg, p. 618.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 651.

¹⁵⁶Select Tales of Tchekhov, p. 530.

The old professor did not, however, find the strength to overcome his nihilistic attitude in an instinctive love for life.

Mann detects in many of the characters in Chekhov's stories this indifference, spiritual emptiness and stagnation. Their high ideals of progress and a better future only cover up the inner sickness, but are unable to cure it. He says of Chekhov: "Als Arzt hegt er eine ausgesprochene Geringschätzung der Palliativmittel, mit denen dieser Fortschrittsbürger die soziale Krankheit behandelt" (p.861). Adrian Leverkühn in Doktor Faustus regards any attempt to retain that which is doomed to decay as "kunstreichste Wurzelbalsamierung"¹⁵⁷ of a dead tooth. Since such palliative remedies do not go to the root of the problem, they cannot eradicate the causes of man's suffering.

Mann maintains that the basic cause of suffering is man's inability to liberate himself from the bonds which life places on him of necessity. A feeling of hopelessness is inevitable, "da doch die Verhältnisse nur zu gegeben sind und alles seine unheilbare Notwendigkeit hat" (p.862). For Mann Chekhov's story "A Doctor's Visit" ("Ein Fall aus der Praxis"), 1898, illustrates this problem. In the story, Dr. Korolyev, regarding the improvements that have been made in the living and working conditions of factory workers, although he does not consider them superfluous, compares them, as Mann states, "mit dem Herumkurieren an unheilbaren Krankheiten. 'Wenn schon kurieren,' hört man ihn sagen, 'dann nicht die Krankheiten, sondern ihre Ursachen'" (p.861). Mann quotes the doctor further, who feels that in fact the improvements serve "unter den gegebenen Verhältnissen auch nur der Versklavung" (p.862).

¹⁵⁷Thomas Mann, Doktor Faustus, p. 201.

In Mann's opinion man may realize like the rich heiress who will one day own these factories, what the causes of the social sickness are. However, he either does not know how, or has not the courage and strength to make any radical changes. Mann cites Chekhov's story "Peasants" ("Die Bauern"), 1897, in order to show that the social conditions and habits of the time were so strongly established, so ingrained that the momentary freedom and feeling of human worth these people experienced during a religious procession had no lasting effect. Mann quotes from the story: "Aber kaum war der Gottesdienst beendet und das Heiligenbild fortgetragen, da ging alles in alter Weise weiter, und wieder hörte man aus dem Wirtshaus die groben, betrunkenen Stimmen" (p.865). He continues: "Das ist sehr echter Tschechow in seiner Rührung und seiner Bitterkeit darüber, dass alles in alter Weise weitergeht . . ." (p.865).

Thomas Mann observes in Chekhov his own pessimistic conclusion, the realization that man is basically

. . . ein verfehltes Wesen. . . . Sein Gewissen, das des Geistes ist, wird wohl nie mit seiner Natur, seiner Wirklichkeit, seinem gesellschaftlichen Zustande in reine Harmonie zu bringen sein. und immer wird es "ehrenhafte Schlaflosigkeit" geben bei solchen, die sich aus irgendeinem dunklen Grunde für das Menschenlos und -leben verantwortlich fühlen. (p.863)

This discrepancy between truth and reality, "Geist" and "Natur," is, as has been shown, the source of irony. It is the cause of the artist's scepticism towards himself, the reason for his bad conscience.

Irony--A Destructive and Creative Principle

In his essay "Goethe und Tolstoi," Thomas Mann states that irony "ist das Pathos der Mitte. . . . Sie ist auch ihre Moral, ihr Ethos," irony is "Erkennen und Einsicht."¹⁵⁸ The artist, because of his capacity for

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," F.V., IX, p. 171.

"Erkenntnis," remains at all times at a critical distance from both truth and reality. From this central, distant vantage point he can observe their paradoxical nature, that the one of necessity negates the other. Irony, consequently, is--in a certain sense--a basically destructive principle. In his essay "Phantasie über Goethe" Mann says regarding the nature of irony in Goethe:

. . . ein tiefer Nihilismus, der zum Scheiden und Werten unwillige Objektivismus der Kunst--und der Natur--ist darin wirksam, etwas Natur-Elbisches, das aller Eindeutigkeit entwischt, ein Element der Fragwürdigkeit, der Verneinung und des umfassenden Zweifels, das ihn . . . gern Sätze sprechen liess, die gleich den Widerspruch auch schon enthielten.¹⁵⁹

Such an irony could result in scorn and cold mockery. Mann, however, felt that, although a certain bitterness is apparent at all times in Chekhov's later works, he retained much of his early humour. Thus he finds Chekhov "ausserordentlich komisch" when he depicts "die Aufgeblasenheit der Leere" (p.866) as is the case for example with the hero of the play "Uncle Vanya" ("Onkel Wanja"), 1897, whom Mann describes as "eine von ihrer Würde überzeugte Null" (p.866). In the beginning of his essay on Chekhov Mann maintained that with a growing critical awareness Chekhov's humour "[wird] sich mit Geistigem vermählen, moralische Veredelung erfahren, aus dem Ergötzlichen zum Erschütternden aufsteigen . . ." (p.848).

Käte Hamburger in her book Der Humor bei Thomas Mann, in analyzing the point of connection between irony and humour, writes:

Die Voraussetzung dafür, dass die Diskrepanz zwischen Eigentlichem und Uneigentlichem das Lächeln des Humors erzeugt, ist, dass das Eigentliche, der eigentliche Sinn, der noch in seiner uneigentlichsten Erscheinungsform erkennbar ist, von ethisch-humaner und nicht von antihumaner Natur ist.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹Thomas Mann, "Phantasie über Goethe," Gesammelte Werke, F.V., IX, p. 740.

¹⁶⁰Käte Hamburger, Der Humor bei Thomas Mann: Zum Joseph-Roman (München, 1965), p. 24.

When Mann says of Chekhov that he will even "in tiefstem, bitterstem Ernst den Sinn fürs Komische aber nie verlernen . . ." (p.848), he brings into the foreground exactly this, that Chekhov's attitude towards mankind was always "von ethisch-humaner und nicht von antihumaner Natur."

If irony is not directed solely towards the depiction of the discrepancy existing between truth and reality, but beyond it towards a higher unity, towards Mann's idea of "humanitas," even irony, Mann felt, can become, instead of a destructive principle, a creative one. Th. Mann writes in the essay "Goethe und Tolstoi":

Schön ist Entschlossenheit. Aber das eigentlich fruchtbare, das produktive und also das künstlerische Prinzip nennen wir den Vorbehalt. . . . Wir lieben ihn im Geistigen als Ironie--jene nach beiden Seiten gerichtete Ironie, welche verschlagen und unverbindlich, wenn auch nicht ohne Herzlichkeit, zwischen den Gegensätzen spielt und es mit Parteinahme und Entscheidung nicht sonderlich eilig hat: voll der Vermutung, dass in grossen Dingen, in Dingen des Menschen, jede Entscheidung als vorschnell und vorgütig sich erweisen möchte, dass nicht Entscheidung das Ziel ist, sondern der Einklang,--welcher, wenn es sich um ewige Gegensätze handelt, im Unendlichen liegen mag, den aber jener spielende Vorbehalt, Ironie genannt, in sich selber trägt, wie der Vorhalt die Auflösung.¹⁶¹

Irony, "Erkenntnis," "Geist," the principle of detachment, alienation from life, decadence, decay--sickness--has inherent in it, according to Mann, the idea of unification, of a totality embracing "Geist" and "Leben," the aesthetical and the ethical. In Mann's opinion irony is also the principle governing Chekhov's life and art. It could be summed up in the words Mann uses to describe Chekhov's personality: "Skepsis und Güte, freundliche[r] Melancholie" (p.866).

Sickness, since it means alienation from life, had always been for Mann one of the major factors creating an ironic distance. At the age of twenty-nine Chekhov had noticed the first symptoms of tuberculosis in himself.

¹⁶¹Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," F.V., IX, pp. 170-171.

As a doctor he could not hide from himself the fact that he would probably not live to a great age. Mann regards the knowledge of his sickness as an important element in Chekhov's relation to his art. He writes:

Man fragt sich, ob nicht das Wissen um die Knappbemessenheit seines Geistes auf Erden zu der eigentümlichen, skeptischen Bescheidenheit wesentlich beitrug, die fortfuhr, seine geistige und künstlerische Gesamthaltung zu bestimmen--den Instinkt sogar eingerechnet aus dieser Bescheidenheit eine Sonder-Qualität seines Künstlertums zu machen, sie zu einem spezifischen Zauber seiner Existenz zu erheben. (p.853)

This attitude of "Bescheidenheit" and "vollendeter Anspruchslosigkeit" (p.866) was, according to Mann, Chekhov's manner of expressing an ironic detachment from life. He felt that it governed his actions even in such matters of personal happiness as love and marriage. Mann writes of Chekhov's letters to Lydia Misinova, a girl who had loved Chekhov deeply: "Aber seine Lettres d'amour sollen in ironischem Ton gehalten sein und die Scheu vor jedem tieferen Gefühl erkennen lassen, die vielleicht seine Krankheit ihm einflösste" (p.867). Even the letters to Olga Knipper, whom he married three years before his death, "auch sie sind von grösster Vorsicht im Gefühl, halten sich im Schalkhaft-Ironischen" (p.867).

Chekhov's "ironischer Vorbehalt," Mann maintains, prevented him perhaps from experiencing events in his life fully and deeply, from being passionately involved in them: "Es ist, als ob dieser Mensch auch für die Leidenschaft zu bescheiden gewesen wäre" (p.867). However, it gave him the necessary prerequisite, an ironic distance, for recreating life in his art. Thus Th. Mann says of Chekhov's relation to Lydia Misinova: "Aber wenn mit Tschechow nichts anzufangen war--er wusste mit der Sache etwas anzufangen und hat die Episode in sein bei uns meistgespieltes Stück, "Die Möwe" ("The Seagull"), 1896, verwoben" (p.867).

In this way, according to Mann's interpretation, Chekhov's life and art are interwoven. However, was Chekhov able to fulfill Mann's "moralische Forderung, die ja immer sozial-moralisch ist,"¹⁶² as he says in the essay "Goethe und Tolstoi"? Or would his feeling of responsibility towards mankind only result in "ehrenhafte Schlaflosigkeit," because of his inability to resolve the ironic discrepancy between "Geist" and Natur"? Mann says: "Wenn einer an ihr litt, so war es der Künstler Tschechow, und all sein Dichten war ehrenvolle Schlaflosigkeit, die Suche nach dem rechten, rettenden Wort auf die Frage: 'Was sollen wir tun?'" (p.863). Thomas Mann concludes that Chekhov did find an answer, that he placed his hope on one thing--on work--in spite of his fundamental realization that life is "ein auswegloses Problem" (p.864; see also p. 43, n. 78).

Das Wort war schwer, wenn überhaupt zu finden. Nur eines wusste er bestimmt: dass Müssiggang das Schlechteste ist, und dass man arbeiten muss, weil nämlich Müssiggang Arbeitenlassen, Ausbeutung und Unterdrückung bedeutet. (p.863)

Thomas Mann felt that work represented for Chekhov the only means of changing a way of life that is morally reprehensible. This idea he found confirmed in Chekhov's story "The Bride" ("Die Braut"), 1903, because he identifies Chekhov's views with those of Sasha, a character in the story who, however, only dreams about a new life. Mann quotes the advice Sasha gives to the girl Nadya: "Liebe, Gute fahren Sie weg! Zeigen Sie allen, dass Sie dieses unbeweglichen, grauen, sündigen Lebens überdrüssig sind. . . . Sobald Sie Ihr Leben umgestaltet haben wird alles anders" (pp.863-864). Mann himself describes Nadya's flight as "die Flucht aus den Bindungen der Klasse, aus einer als absterbend, als falsch und 'sündig' empfundenen Lebensform . . ." (p.864). In identifying Chekhov with Sasha's views, he

¹⁶²Thomas Mann, "Goethe und Tolstoi," F.V., XI, p. 88.

interprets Chekhov's attitude with his own, for Mann felt, as he lets Hans Castorp says, "dass 'müßig oder sündig,' als Alternative schon schlimm genug, gar keine Alternative war, sondern dass das zusammenfiel."¹⁶³ To give up the struggle for a new and better way of life, to succumb to despair and hopelessness made man morally guilty, "[da] geistige Hoffnungslosigkeit," as Mann states in The Magic Mountain, "nur die ausser-moralische Ausdrucksform der Verbotenheit war."¹⁶⁴

The hope expressed in Chekhov's later works appealed strongly to Th. Mann, because he saw in it Chekhov's attempt to overcome his nihilism out of a deep love and concern for mankind. For Mann this struggle, whether in relation to life or art, had always been the source of creativity, of man's greatness. In the last sense it formed the basis of Mann's own hope-- a hope, in spite of or arising out of a basic hopelessness. This same attitude he found again in Chekhov, whom he quotes: "Unzufriedenheit mit sich selber bildet ein Grundelement jedes echten Talents."¹⁶⁵ Mann remarks: "In diesem Satz wendet die Bescheidenheit sich denn doch ins Positive. 'Sei deiner Unzufriedenheit froh,' besagt er. 'Sie beweist, dass du mehr bist als die Selbstzufriedenen,--vielleicht sogar gross'" (p.868-869). In this sentence Th. Mann states the principle he regarded as the source of greatness. It is the Goethean idea of "Bildung," which, paradoxically, maintains that

¹⁶³Thomas Mann, Zauberberg, p. 683.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵This quotation is taken from Chekhov's letter to A. S. Souvorin, February 14, 1889. Chekhov tells Souvorin that in answer to a letter ("filled with complaints against fate and people") from Svobodin, he gave him the advice "that discontent is one of the innate qualities of true talent;" adding humorously "with my usual malice prepense I wished him to be always discontented" (Letters on Literature, p. 192).

scepticism, inner uncertainty and dissatisfaction can act as a catalyst, stimulating the creative potential in man. A heroic "Trotzdem" (p.869) is necessary to surmount the destructive force of scepticism. In 1906 in a letter to Kurt Martens (March 28) Mann had said: "Heldenthum ist für mich ein 'Trotzdem,' überwundene Schwäche, es gehört Zartheit dazu."¹⁶⁶ This struggle and effort has as its goal, although always unattainable, the unity, harmony between "Geist" and "Leben." This goal, underlying Mann's life and art, renews his energy continually in the fight against his pessimism.

Und man arbeitet dennoch [Mann writes], erzählt Geschichten, formt die Wahrheit und ergötzt damit eine bedürftige Welt in der dunklen Hoffnung, fast in der Zuversicht, dass Wahrheit und heitere Form wohl seelisch befreiend wirken und die Welt auf ein besseres, schöneres, dem Geiste gerechteres Leben vorbereiten können. (p.869)

This vision of a better, more beautiful life is almost identical to the ideal Mann regarded as the hope of Chekhov's life. "Es ist das Bild," he says, "einer auf Arbeit gegründeten Vereinigung von Wahrheit und Schönheit" (p.864).

Although this ideal does give to life purpose and direction, a guiding principle, thus removing to a certain extent what Mann regarded as the cause of Chekhov's former scepticism towards himself, it does not give any final answers concerning the meaning of life itself. The artist, according to Mann, fails in his moral responsibility towards mankind if all he is capable of doing is "eine verlorene Welt ergötzen, ohne ihr die Spur einer rettenden Wahrheit in die Hand zu geben" (p.859, see also p. 10, n. 32), if the only reply he can give to the question "Was soll ich tun?" is "Auf Ehre und Gewissen, ich weiss es nicht" (p.869).

¹⁶⁶Thomas Mann, Briefe 1889-1936, p. 63.

Thomas Mann, moreover, felt that Chekhov's doubts, like his own, extended even further towards the meaning and value of art itself. Mann, regarding the discrepancy between truth and reality, life and art, came to the pessimistic conclusion that this discrepancy will always continue to exist, that art cannot change life. Art, therefore, also fails in its moral purpose to create a closer union between "Geist" and "Leben." Mann, consequently, regards with scepticism the visions of a golden future that appear in some of Chekhov's later stories. Thus when Chekhov writes in the story "The Bride": "Life stretched before her, new, vast, spacious, and onward,"¹⁶⁷ Mann after quoting this section retorts pessimistically:

Ein Sterbender schrieb das zu guter Letzt, und vielleicht ist es nur das Geheimnis des Todes, was da ruft und lockt. Oder wollen wir glauben, dass Dichtersehnsucht das Leben wirklich zu ändern vermag?
(p.868)

Nevertheless Th. Mann's pessimism even in relation to the value of art itself is always coupled with an optimism. Thus he says on the one hand that life does not change, yet on the other hand it might change; art has no influence on reality, yet it might have some influence. Consequently, although his whole interpretation of Chekhov's life and work is kept in a basically pessimistic tone, he concludes for example that Chekhov's popularity in Russia rested on his ability to find "Laute sozialen Grams, die seinem Volk ans Herz griffen" (p.865). Mann felt that the justification for Chekhov's activity as a writer can perhaps be found in this ability to arouse the people out of their spiritual lethargy, to awaken in them a yearning for change. Mann regards the social improvements in Russia since Chekhov's death as proof that at least some of his dreams have become reality.

¹⁶⁷A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, trans. Ivy Litvinov (Moscow, n.d.), p. 383.

He writes:

Aber ist nicht in seinem Traum von den "riesigen, wunderschönen Häusern mit herrlichen Gärten und Fontänen," die sich einmal anstelle der abgelebten, nur auf ihr Ende wartenden Stadt erheben werden, etwas von dem sozialistischen Aufbau-Impetus, mit dem das moderne Russland bei allem Schrecken, aller Feindseligkeit, den Westen beeindruckt? (p.865)¹⁶⁸

Chekhov's literary work, therefore, did have a meaningful value in relation to life, in spite of his inability to give any final answers.

Mann, in his interpretation of Chekhov, captured the most basic elements of Chekhov's nature: "Seine Ironie gegen den Ruhm, sein Zweifel an Sinn und Wert seines Tuns, der Unglaube an seine Grösse" (p.868); Chekhov's "Bescheidenheit" and "Güte"; his continual struggle in spite of a bad conscience. However, Mann's interpretation of these characteristics revolves predominantly around the antithesis between "Geist" and "Leben," the aesthetical and the ethical, which the artist must overcome out of a moral sense of duty towards mankind. In my opinion this antithesis did not form the basis of Chekhov's relation to his art and life. Consequently his irony, scepticism, and pessimism had different roots.

Impressionism

Thomas Mann's dilemma, the cause of his irony, arises out of the fact that the world, reality, is seen through the eyes of the artist. The subject-object relation between the artist and life makes objectivity a problem creating the need for critical detachment. Chekhov, however, did not feel that reality could be grasped as the total sum of the positive and negative. Dmitri Chizhevsky, stating Chekhov's opinion, writes:

¹⁶⁸The quotation in Mann's statement is taken from Chekhov's story "The Bride."

Reality, the "events" cannot be measured or judged in any way "objectively" for the very reason that they do not appear immediately to the person, but rather in the form of a reflection in the mind of the individual in question.¹⁶⁹

Chekhov, as a result, reversed the relationship in his desire to depict reality as it is, making reality the subject and the artist the object.

The artist can only become the object if he eliminates to the greatest extent possible any interference from, or involvement of his own personality. In this way he also eliminates the dialectic impartiality of "Geist," the source of Mann's irony. A sentence in the story "The Bride" describes Chekhov's way of perceiving reality. Nina Ivanovna, Nadya's mother, says:

The great thing is for life to be seen through a prism. . . . In other words life must be divided up in our consciousness into its simplest elements, as if into the seven primary colours, and each element must be studied separately.¹⁷⁰

Mann quotes this phrase as an example of the Russian love for endless but useless discussions, as only one of the many answers to the usual question "what should one do?" Yet this sentence is of greater significance, although in the story itself it is of little meaning. It is exactly in this way, by dissecting, by breaking each object up into its separate components, as a prism divides the white light into all the colours of the spectrum, that Chekhov hopes to see true reality, which is far more complex than it appears on the surface and at first glance to be. The world under Chekhov's prismatic view falls apart, becomes atomized, disconnected. According to Chekhov, man obtains a false, distorted image of reality if he regards it from his own subjective viewpoint. Chekhov on the contrary felt that reality can only be grasped if it alone plays the active role. The artist must

¹⁶⁹Dmitri Chizhevsky, "Chekhov in the Development of Russian Literature," p. 57.

¹⁷⁰A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, pp. 381-382.

remain passive so that the objects, comprising reality, can form an impression on him, like a stamp on a mould.

Since Chekhov, as an artist, takes no standpoint in relation to life, but remains completely passive in order to let reality form an impression on him, his basic attitude is not one of irony. Because Chekhov does not regard reality from the dialectical viewpoint of "Geist," as understood in the tradition of German idealistic philosophy, reality is not split up into positive and negative, it does not become antithetical. When Chekhov depicts a problem, the positive is not annulled, neutralized by the negative. Rather all the components of a problem exist side by side, like the colours of a spectre, or the separate brush-strokes of an impressionist painter. They serve only to illuminate a problem from all angles, and to prevent the reader from generalizing from only one point of view. The result of Mann's attitude was nihilism. The impression one obtains of Chekhov's world is one of disintegration, disconnection.

Here lies the basic difference between Mann's interpretation of Chekhov's view of the world and Chekhov's own attitude. For Mann the world is not disjointed, disconnected on the whole. There exist people, like the blue-eyed, blond-haired individuals in Mann's Novelle "Tonio Kröger," who live in harmony with themselves and understand each other. Isolation and estrangement is for Mann an existential situation, which is concentrated mainly in the personality of the artist; decadence and suffering is the result of the artist's paradoxical, ambivalent nature which fluctuates between "Geist" and "Natur."

For Chekhov the problem of separation, and lack of contact was much more fundamental. He does not place the core of such a separation necessarily in art, or "Geist." He feels rather that man, since he is capable of seeing

reality only from his own subjective viewpoint lacks basically understanding for the reality, the world of others. No unifying principle exists, exists. This results in isolation, lack of contact, and, consequently, in misunderstanding and suffering. The discrepancies arising out of the different way people regard reality becomes the source of irony in Chekhov's stories. The contrast between man's ideals and life itself, man's actions and unconscious motivations, is only one of many ironic discrepancies noticed by Chekhov.

Chekhov's short story "The Man Who Lived in a Shell" ["Čelovek v futljare"], 1898, portrays in an almost symbolic manner this state of isolation in many of his characters. This story is an extreme example of a person, who is afraid of life, who surrounds himself with a shell, a covering--not only physically (wearing an overcoat, galoshes, etc., even on sunny days), but mentally. He feels secure and happy only in the circle of prohibitions with which he has surrounded not only himself, but also everyone else, regarding anything that is not strictly forbidden with distrust--something terrible might happen. This admirer and teacher of the Greek language, a dead language, is at peace only in the grave, for in death he has no longer anything to fear.

Now, as he lay in his coffin, the expression on his face was gentle, pleasing, even cheerful, as if he were glad at last to be put into a case which he would never have to leave. Yes, he had achieved his ideal!¹⁷¹

This shell, or covering is a cage separating people from each other, barring them from any understanding or communication with the world around them. Everyone lives, consequently, in isolation, in his own world.

¹⁷¹A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, p. 275.

This cage or shell can take on many different forms. In the story "Gooseberries" ["Kryžovnik"], 1898, it appears in the trivial, banal desire of the main character to have his own garden, so that he can grow his own gooseberry bushes. This wish dominates his whole life, consuming all his energy, thoughts, and time. Nothing else exists or matters for him, and as soon as he attains his goal and can eat as many gooseberries as he likes, he is happy. The gooseberries represent one of these barriers. Any ideal or aim, whether for the future or the present, whether great or trivial, prevents the individual from seeing life around him, seeing the problems of others.

In the stories "About Love" ["O ljubvi"], 1898, and "The Lady with the Dog" ["Dama s sobačkoj"], 1899, it is the social institution of marriage and all the obligations and responsibilities that accompany it, which hinder the fulfilment of a deeper love. Society, the outside world, with its regulations and predetermined notions on how to live, work, love, etc. robs the individual of the freedom to find his own happiness and way of life.

Furthermore, the enslavement of the individual through routine, regulations, his own convictions and egoistic desires again prevents him from understanding others and separates him from them. This is seen in such stories as "Ward No. 6" ["Palata No. 6"], 1892, "The Duel" ["Duel"], 1891, and "Enemies" ["Vragi"], 1887. In the latter two stories it results in enmity. In "Enemies" it is the personal grief of each of the two main characters which prevents any understanding between them and which brings to the fore the social elements separating them. "Unhappy men are selfish, wicked, unjust and less able to understand each other than fools. Unhappiness does not unite people, but separates them. . . ." ¹⁷² In "The

¹⁷²The Stories of Anton Tchekov, ed. R. N. Linscott (New York, 1932), p.51.

Duel" the antagonism stems mainly from a difference in personalities and outlook on life. On the one hand there is the strong character, who believes that the weak should be annihilated, since they are a decadent, destructive force in society, and on the other hand the weak character, who blames his failure in life on the general tendency of the times. The lack of any understanding between them results in the conflict ending finally in the duel. After the duel a positive change does come about in the weak Hamlet-like figure, leading, however, only to an apparent superficial reconciliation. "Ward No. 6" is again a symbol of the cage of shell in which all the characters of the story live, whether it appears in the form of the persecution mania of the patient who is locked up, or the constructed, stoic philosophy of the doctor, rationalizing away all the unpleasantness surrounding him, or the social, bureaucratic straight-jacket of the officials.

Because each person lives in his own little sphere, the disintegration of any real relationship or communication between people results in a decomposed, dismembered, atomized world. But Chekhov observed that even within the individual himself there is very often no unifying element or idea, so that he, too, is broken up into many disparate parts. As the name of the short story "Chameleon" ["Chameleon"], 1884, implies, the main character is a type of person who changes according to the circumstances. This change is not simply an outer, simulated change, but a change of the whole being. The story "Darling" ["Dusečka"], 1899, also gives a clear example of a person in whom the various elements of the personality are entirely unrelated. "Darling," with each new marriage or new love, after the death of the previous husband, completely takes over the ideas, likes, and dislikes of her new husband, although they are sometimes in direct contrast to the opinions she formerly held. There is no connection between past and present;

nothing of her former nature and surroundings had any lasting influence on her.

The people in Chekhov's world, even though they live in a shell and may never succeed in escaping out of it, are not forced irrevocably to live in it by their very nature. The possibility of change is left open; nothing has an absolute power and influence over the individual. For Chekhov there is not outcome which must necessarily follow what went before. Man is basically free, if he would only discover his own freedom.

This is in contrast to Mann's view, who sees man essentially in direct connection with the society and times in which he lives. He seeks the causes and motives for the actions of people in the inherited character traits of a person and in the influence society and education have had upon them. This is the view of reality which is largely deterministic, and which follows the traditions of realism and naturalism. Even the artist's desire for freedom is an inborn trait; he cannot escape his fate, as Mann's interpretation of Chekhov has shown.

However, in Chekhov's world, even in such cases where man has been able to free himself from the bonds of the past, there is little hope for any tangible change in the future. Nadya in "The Bride," for example, succeeded in making a clear break with her past life:

She realized clearly that her life had been turned topsy-turvy, as Sasha had wanted it to be, that she was lonely, alien, unwanted here, and that there was nothing she wanted here, the past had been torn away and vanished, as if burned by fire, and the ashes scattered to the winds.¹⁷³

This change, however, also broke all ties of feeling, of love and friendship. Her vision of a bright future full of mystery was the cause of the

¹⁷³A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, p. 383.

disintegration of these relationships. Nadya says good-bye to her family and leaves her native town "gay and full of spirits--never to come back, she was sure."¹⁷⁴ This last phrase adds a touch of irony to her hopes. Since she placed her faith in this vague ideal, she was unable to see the true basis of life--an understanding of other people. Her new life, will, therefore, not bring any decisive change in her existence. Rather it will only substitute one form of bondage for another.

Whenever Chekhov deals with people in his stories who think they have found their goal, an idea which lies at the basis of their actions and gives meaning to their life, it is usually done ironically. This is the case, for example, in the story "The Black Monk" ["Černyj Monach"], 1894, where the main character considers himself almost a superman in the Nietzschean sense, separated from the common herd by superior intelligence and sensibility. The black monk, a creation of his sick imagination, holds up to him in glowing colours the greatness of his goal, for which no sacrifice is too great--the dedication of one's life to the service of eternal truth. But when asked what he understands by eternal truth, the black monk vanishes, leaving the question unanswered. This self-acclaimed superman finally dies, still joyfully believing in his divine goal of which he does not know the meaning.

The theme of work, where it appears in an optimistic light, is also accompanied by Chekhov's irony, for the glorious goals it sets itself, the bright future that work is designed to bring about, all these beautiful ideals simply turn man's gaze away from reality, from the problems confronting him from day to day. Mann, as has been shown, had regarded these expressions of faith in work and in the future as a true manifestation of

¹⁷⁴A. P. Chekhov, Short Novels and Stories, p. 383.

Chkekhov's own hope--in spite of his basic scepticism.

According to Chekhov, all these inner and outer barriers prevent man from seeing beyond his own small world, from finding a common basis that could help people to understand each other. Without a unifying idea, he felt, life becomes absurd, meaningless. This was the conclusion at which the old scientist of "A Dreary Story" had arrived. Yet the professor's despair only became another form of this same shell, isolating him from others.

Chekhov's irony is not predominantly directed, as Mann thought, towards a society that has outlived its ideals and principles, a reality that has become stagnant and inflexible. Rather it focuses on the fundamental situation of man's existence, which will not change, even if society were to come closer to its idealized conception of a better life. The antithesis between life and man's ideals is not the problem, as for Mann, but rather man's inability to understand his fellow man, because he can only perceive reality from his own restricted point of view. Consequently a closer relation between "Geist" and "Leben" did not present Chekhov with a means of overcoming the absurdity of life. Chekhov in this case finds no answer to the question "what should one do?".

Chekhov's scepticism towards his art, his feeling of deceiving the reader, since he can only paint life as it is, are the direct result of his impressionistic view of the world. He could not show man a way out of his dilemma, since for him no guiding idea exists. Chekhov's pessimism, consequently, was more consistent than Mann had regarded it to be. For him work did not present this answer, the moral justification of his life and art in Mann's sense. He did not regard the striving towards this higher unity between life and art, the aesthetical and the ethical, towards this ideal image of man, as the answer to man's problem. He would have regarded this

idea as another barrier to man's understanding of others.

Because Mann considered the split between "Geist" and "Leben" as a moral problem, he regarded reality, this stagnant life, as "sündig." The artist's inability to change this reprehensible way of life constituted his guilt. Since the feeling of immobility one obtains of life in Chekhov's works is not the result of man's failure to bring life into a closer relation to "Geist," his works do not have Mann's moral basis. The life Chekhov depicts is static, resembles a nature morte, because all the elements in it are unrelated, because men live side by side without having any true communication with each other. This is not entirely their fault, because, as Chekhov perceived it, this lies in the nature of reality. Although Chekhov saw the cause of man's suffering, unlike Mann, he did not judge him.

Chekhov's attitude towards mankind, in spite of his pessimism with regard to the absurdity of life, was characterized by a deep compassion, sympathy and love--a profound understanding for man's situation. This is what he felt is necessary in life--love and compassion. This is the ethical standpoint Chekhov wanted to suggest to the reader in his depiction of man's basic isolation. He did not make this idea an absolute guideline; his view of life did not permit it. The only way it can be realized, he felt, is not by making it some abstract goal, but by attempting to apply it to each individual situation in life.

Only love, compassion, and understanding could break the barriers separating people. However, Chekhov always remained doubtful as to whether people would see and understand this, because he was deeply sceptical of man's ability to recognize the cause of his isolation, to become even fully aware of it.

Chekhov's lack of a guiding principle, the result of his impressionistic view of the world, was the cause of his doubts towards the value of his literary work. Man seeks guidance in literature and he felt he could not give it. He could not propound any principle, not even the necessity to struggle, to work for a better way of life, for "ein besseres, schöneres, dem Geiste gerechteres Leben."

However, in his personal life Chekhov's doubts did not hinder his attempts to be of aid, since life itself placed different demands on Chekhov than art. Whereas in art he felt he had to eliminate any influence of his own views, Chekhov in his personal life helped by all means at his disposal, putting into practice his idea that man must confront the everyday problems that surround him, that he should neither despair, nor be blinded by ideals, but work in the consciousness of life's basic absurdity. This was the core of Chekhov's humanism--and not the vision of a higher "humanitas."

IV CONCLUSION

This thesis attempted to show that the themes and motives, the problems dealt with and the convictions expressed in Thomas Mann's essay "Versuch über Tschechow," are more a reflection of Thomas Mann's personality and ideas during the last years of his life than a true analysis of Chekhov. Although Mann's interpretation of Chekhov resulted in an artistic and highly interesting essay, the entirely personal standpoint of the author led him to regard certain elements in Chekhov's nature and art from a perspective foreign to Chekhov himself.

The slightly contemptible opinion Thomas Mann formerly held of Chekhov's short stories, due to a love for the large epic work, was abandoned by him late in his life, because he realized that in spite of their brevity Chekhov's stories retained the vast canvas of life typical of an epic. According to Th. Mann, the short story form was in Chekhov's case simply an expedient, a conscious renunciation of epic monumentality, forced upon him by the knowledge of his sickness. Consequently, he admired even more Chekhov's ability to incorporate in his stories a broad historical, social background, the framework for a depiction of man's eternal struggle to find the meaning of his own existence.

This conception links Chekhov with the problems which interested Mann in his own epic works--the search for that which is "menschlich-ewig." In the introduction to The Magic Mountain, written in 1939, fifteen years after the novel itself was completed, Mann calls it "[die] Suche nach dem »Gral«, " that is, "nach dem Höchsten, nach Wissen, Erkenntnis, Einweihung, nach dem Stein der Weisen, dem aurum potabile, dem Trunk des Lebens."¹⁷⁵ Mann felt

¹⁷⁵Thomas Mann, Zauberberg, p. xi.

that in order to crystallize those elements in man which are truly eternal, the limitations of time and space, of the historical, the individual and personal, must be overcome. Through the juxtaposition of the historical with the timeless, the problems and experiences of the individual lose their sad or even tragic purport, while gaining in significance and merging with those of all humanity.

Thus Mann considered the problems Chekhov encountered in relation to his art as representative for the fate of the artist in general. He saw this fate as a constant struggle to overcome the forces of decay, decadence, and death in the search for a new meaning of life, the attempt to regain the true dignity of man. This, Mann felt, is an endless struggle, since the destructive and the creative forces go hand in hand, since what man recognizes as true and good will never coincide with reality, since man's "Geist" will remain in eternal antithesis to "Leben." Mann regarded it as the moral duty of the artist, once he has become conscious of his talent, to endeavor to unite the forces of life and those of the mind in his art, for art should not be only aesthetical but also ethical.

This connection between the aesthetical and the ethical Mann perceived in the early manifestations of Chekhov's talent, in the "Geist und Eigenwillen der Literatur," which prompts a writer to recognize that art cannot be purely personal and aesthetical, to become aware of the ethical element in his writing. It compels him, as Th. Mann observed in Chekhov, to take a critical attitude both towards society and his art, and to comprehend gradually the nature of his responsibility towards mankind as a writer.

According to Th. Mann, however, the awakening of a critical consciousness, the recognition that the capacity for "Erkenntnis" forms an integral part of the artist's nature, results inevitably in a nihilistic

philosophy of life. The writer begins to doubt his ability to fulfill the demands for guidance, for final answers as to the meaning of life, placed upon him by society. The writer's scepticism towards his art Th. Mann saw confirmed in Chekhov's "Bescheidenheit," in his feeling of deceiving, of blinding the reader with his talent, since he is only able to depict life as it is, but cannot provide an ethical guideline.

Thomas Mann's conviction that life, since it ends in death, is basically meaningless forced him, in his search for something of value, to place the emphasis not on the final result, but on that which is attainable in life. Following the example of Goethe (as this thesis has attempted to show), Mann regarded the striving towards an ideal of man, in whom all the paradoxical elements of human nature are incorporated, as a justification to man's existence. Not only did Mann find this attitude corroborated in the fact that Chekhov continued writing in spite of basic doubts towards his art, but also in the stress Chekhov placed on the need to work. Work signified for Mann a creative act, whether in the realm of art or in life, a striving to unify "Erkenntnis" and "Form," the ethical and the aesthetical.

Since complete unification, the highest fulfilment of man, is only possible, according to Mann, with the annihilation of life, an ironic discrepancy between truth and reality will always continue to exist as long as creation and not destruction is man's highest goal. In order to recreate life in art a writer must, therefore, remain at all times at an ironic distance--an attitude Mann found typical of Chekhov.

The hope Mann finds expressed in many of Chekhov's later stories, that life will come closer some day to man's ideal visions, reflects Mann's own hopes of a unification between truth and reality. This hope induced Paul Altenberg to say of Mann:

Der "Dichter der Dekadenz" ist zum Darsteller der Überwindung der Dekadenz geworden. Nach einem Menschheitsuntergang ahnt man den Morgen eines neuen Tages, und die Sorge, die uns bleibt, wird sein, dass in Wahrheit und trotz aller Spannungen und Schwierigkeiten unsere Zeit ein Menschentag werde, der Tag einer neuen Humanität.¹⁷⁶

This hope was, however, nearly always tinged with an ironic note, as Mann's pessimistic appraisal of Chekhov's dreams for a better future indicated.

This pessimism was particularly strong at the time he was writing the essay on Chekhov, for Mann was in a state of spiritual depression brought on partly by the feeling that sickness and old age were causing his talent and his energy to decline. His pessimistic attitude was directed mainly towards the value and meaning of art itself, its ability to transform, to bring about decisive change in life.

Thus belief and disbelief, pessimism and optimism intermingle not only in Mann's own thoughts, but also in his interpretation of Chekhov. In spite of his striving towards a higher "humanitas," the hope he expressed at the end of his "Versuch über Tschechow," underlying Mann's thoughts is the certainty that man will remain eternally a mystery. In the introduction to The Magic Mountain he states: "Der Gral ist ein Geheimnis, aber auch die Humanität ist das. Denn der Mensch selbst ist ein Geheimnis, und alle Humanität beruht auf Ehrfurcht vor dem Geheimnis des Menschen."¹⁷⁷ This certainty Mann had in common with Chekhov, who once maintained that in this world "one can't make out anything." Since Mann, however, interpreted Chekhov from the point of view of his thoughts on the unification of the aesthetical and the ethical, he was inclined to regard the visions of a

¹⁷⁶Altenberg, pp. 40-41.

¹⁷⁷Thomas Mann, Zauberberg, p. xii.

golden future in Chekhov's last stories as an expression of true hope and faith in a new humanity. In this way he misinterpreted the nature and strength of Chekhov's scepticism, which had firmer roots in Chekhov's whole attitude towards life and art.

Chekhov did not regard the artist as the mediator between "Geist" and "Leben." His desire for objectivity in art resulted rather in a striving to separate, and not to unite, his personal view of life and the depiction of life in art. The artist, Chekhov felt, should be an impartial witness, who simply states the facts and depicts life as it is.

Chekhov's view of life in relation to his art was impressionistic. It revealed to him not only the discrepancy between truth and reality, but a general lack of communication between people. According to Chekhov, man is on the whole incapable of perceiving reality as it is, since he regards it from his own subjective viewpoint, distorting its true nature by preconceived ideas, convictions and norms. The vision of reality which man creates for himself surrounds him like a shell, isolating him within his own small world and preventing him from understanding others. No general, unifying principle, consequently, exists between people, but even within the individual himself, Chekhov observed, there is no unifying element. However, even if man were able to overcome the barrier of his personal view of life, Chekhov was convinced that he will not find what he is yearning for, what the old scientist of "A Dreary Story" called "den Gott des lebendigen Menschen." As a positivist, Chekhov felt that life has no underlying ethical, spiritual purpose, that it is basically meaningless. This attitude was not the result, as Mann thought, of a critical consciousness leading to nihilism, but rather of Chekhov's prismatic, impressionistic view of life.

Consequently, the irony in Chekhov's stories did not stem from the artist's capacity for "Erkenntnis," which in a dialectic process of criticism arrives at the conclusion that life is ironic since it destroys man's ideals. Chekhov, on the contrary, was of the opinion that precisely man's ideals, but also his fears and prejudices, everything which comprises the shell, create the ironic situations in life. Hopes and dreams, principles and guidelines only reveal man's ignorance of its true nature. They prevent him from seeing, accepting and coping with life as it is, for life, Chekhov felt, is something undefinable, which no-one can ever understand.

Whereas Mann places the emphasis on Chekhov's struggle to find such an ethical guideline, on the necessity of changing life, of bringing it nearer to "Geist" and "truth" through work, for Chekhov such a guideline did not exist. As I have attempted to show in this thesis, Chekhov's admiration for Tolstoy and his attempts at a large epic work indicated that such unifying ideas and firm moral standpoints were foreign to his artistic nature. The underlying ethical current in Chekhov's stories cannot be explained by such abstract concepts as the striving towards the unity of "Wahrheit und Schönheit," to be found for example in his story "The Bride," or towards "ein besseres, schöneres, dem Geiste gerechteres Leben," as Mann saw it. Rather it is a force which directs the reader, not to some general ethical conclusion, but to the particular source of misunderstanding, of dissatisfaction with life, to the reason for unhappiness in each individual situation portrayed in his stories. It is a force directed solely towards life, towards love, compassion and understanding.

Thomas Mann interprets Chekhov from the point of view that Chekhov's positivistic ideas and attitudes in relation to his life found their

reflection in his art. He stresses Chekhov's belief in work as a means of creating a better future, disregarding in this respect Chekhov's fundamental doubts as to the possibility of solving man's basic problems. Although Chekhov criticized many of the social and even political conditions existing at the time, this did not form the core of his interest in his art. He sought, rather, the human being behind the facade of ideas and labels. This permitted him, for example, to depict with sympathy people clinging to a way of life Mann would have regarded as "sinful."

Chekhov does not judge, does not condemn, does not divide into good and evil. His talent and his art were of a different kind. With a seismographic sensitivity he penetrated and portrayed the hidden corners of the soul. His prismatic dissection of man, moreover, revealed to him the causes of man's suffering of which man himself is often not aware or able to remove. However, in spite of the underlying note of sadness in many of his stories, the richness and warmth of compassion, the love of man shimmering even through Chekhov's most pessimistic literary creations gives to them the guiding thread, the unifying element Chekhov had so earnestly longed for.

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